

Sigmus IV

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Category: Halo

Genre: Adventure, Sci-Fi

Language: English

Characters: C. Halsey

Status: Completed

Published: 2014-05-01 20:40:20

Updated: 2015-02-26 01:37:11

Packaged: 2016-04-27 03:59:30

Rating: T

Chapters: 16

Words: 78,446

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: It has been months since Humanity and the Covenant ceased hostilities. While searching for replacement colony worlds, the UNSC finds that a separatist group of hostile Covenant has occupied their target planet. Naval Intelligence dispatches a team of Spartans to investigate. They soon discover that Sigmus IV offers more valuable assets than its real estate.

1. Chapter 1: Briefing

Jacob-209 stared impassively at the matte-grey wall in front of him, his face a blank slate, and wondered where in the new, fragmented galaxy the Office of Naval Intelligence was going to send him next. He'd received summons just after a particularly tricky operation on Alpha-Pegasus I, real 'burn after reading' stuff. So here he was, on the ONI prowler Marie-Antoinette, orbiting around planet Earth. He and Sabina-211 had arrived less than 20 minutes earlier, marching from within their Pelican dropship out into the small hangar. A young Lieutenant had approached him, they had exchanged salutes, and then he had been taken to this dimly lit cabin, containing only two chairs and a metal table. He had been there for 5 minutes now, silently staring at the same patch of wall and brushing non-existent dust off of his fatigues.

The door opposite him opened with a hiss, and a short Asian woman with piercing green eyes and smooth black hair, wearing the black uniform of the ONI Prowler Fleet, emblazoned with the stripes of a Vice Admiral, walked into the room. She held a small datapad in one hand. Jake immediately stood to attention and saluted smartly, his face set in an emotionless facade.

The Vice Admiral nodded, and gestured for Jake to return to his seat without a word. She lowered herself onto the opposing chair, and looked up into his eyes.

"Chief Petty Officer Jacob-209, welcome to the newest addition to the

Fleet." She said, the corners of her mouth twitching slightly. "I've read your service record, and I've got to say I'm impressed, and that's nothing to be taken lightly."

Jake hesitated, "Thank you ma'am"

She coughed slightly, cupping her hand over her mouth. "Where are my manners, I'm Vice Admiral Soo-Lin Yao, ONI Section Three. I've asked your CO, Vice Admiral Osman, if I could borrow you and Spartan-211 for a covert operation." She tapped her fingers on the table rhythmically.

Jake raised his eyebrow a fraction. "What's the mission ma'am?" He asked, beginning to feel the raw energy and excitement growing.

She slid the datapad across the table. "What do you know about Sigmus IV?"

He took it in one hand, glancing at a series of images and paragraphs describing a small Earth-like planet orbiting a G2 class star. The CAA handbook stated that although the planet had considerable potential as a habitable colony, the system's huge distance from even the Outer Colonies made any habitation difficult. Dense Jungle and plains covered 45% of the planet's surface, with deep blue ocean filling in the gaps.

"Not much ma'am, what is there to interest us?" Jake asked, passing the datapad back

"Until recently, no one has paid much attention to Sigmus IV, but now the Covenant has fallen apart and Lord Hood has signed the ceasefire, we've been looking for somewhere to re-locate refugees from the glassed colonies." She said that last sentence with a hint of twisted bitterness. The three-decade long conflict between humanity and the conglomeration of alien species called The Covenant had seen many human world burn until their surfaces had been vitrified into a shining glass-like substance. "Unfortunately for us, half a Covenant fleet is currently camped on the planet's surface, and our diplomatic mission was sent back to us, minus their heads." She grimaced slightly. "This group is not under the control of Sanghelios, they are a splinter of the old Covenant military, and they are suspiciously fixated with that planet. Of course, we could have Infinity cruise along and pay them a visit, but we're also interested in potential asset preservation." She paused for breath, her eyes lighting up, obviously excited. "And you're going to lead a reconnaissance team to find out what they're after."

Jake took it all in. "Ma'am, the team?"

"You, Petty Officer Sabina-211, and two others" She replied, hesitating. "I should inform you that the two others are graduates of the SPARTAN-III programme." She paused, awaiting his reaction.

Jake blinked a few times, "Understood, ma'am, they've been through Mendez's care, that's good enough for me." He stated, meaning every word.

She nodded "Excellent, Petty Officers Rachel G-023 and Josef G-167 will join you in the hangar. Intel will be sent via a secure link as you jump. Thanks to some highly secret Forerunner technology, the

dropship you arrived on is equipped with a pin-point accurate Slip-Space drive. Grab anything else you need from the Quarter Master, I may be able to free up some assets if need be, report once you've established a prescence" She stood up smartly and saluted.

Jake shot to his feet and returned the gesture. He turned to walk out of the small room. He was escorted back to the hangar by the same stony-faced lieutenant as before. As he entered the bay, Sabina stood up from her seat in the corner, walking briskly over to meet him.

"What's the mission?" She asked, straight to the point, her hazel eyes glinting.

"Recon, old Covenant force, Sigmus IV, few weeks" He rattled off, looking around for his other team mates. "Sab, they're putting us together with a couple of SPARTAN-IIIs" He said under his breath, looking her in the eyes.

Her own eyes widened slightly "Okay then, where are they?" She said, scanning the room quickly.

As they conversed, a small side-door on the opposite end of the hangar opened, and two small figures in standard Navy fatigues stepped through. The girl was petite, with jet black hair pulled back into a tight ponytail and emerald green eyes. She had sharp, angular features and the same deadpan stare as the other Spartan III. Josef was slightly taller than Rachel at 5'6", much shorter than their predecessors, he had bright blue eyes, and short fair hair. Both were pale skinned and serious-looking. They strode over, covering the distance to the dropship where the two older Spartans were stood in a few seconds.

They came to a halt and saluted, which was returned by Jake and Sabina instantly.

"Petty Officer Josef-G167 reporting for duty sir" the Spartan said, with the slightest hint of a Germanic accent.

Rachel followed on from her squad mate, with an almost imperceptible Australian twang to her own voice "Petty Officer Rachel-G023, reporting for duty sir."

Jake nodded "At ease, Spartans. I'm Jacob-209, and this is Sabina-211." He looked them up and down, noticing their youth. "Have you been briefed?"

They both nodded curtly, relaxing their postures.

"Alright then, we have to load this cart up with everything we'll need for the mission." He banged the hull of the bulked-up Pelican. "That means weapons, ammo, rations, armour assemblies and transport, as well as communications" He paused, smiling slightly "Scratch the comms, I've got something in mind." He turned to face the three other Spartans. "Fall out, gather what you need and meet back here in 30 minutes, understood?"

"Yes sir!" They chorused, and the two younger soldiers paced off towards the armoury. Sabina hung back, pushing a strand of her fair

hair out of her eyes.

"Jay, they're just kids" She mumbled, seemingly shocked "How old are they? 14? 15?"

"So were we once, they've been through the programme, that's all I need to know" He replied, stiff-jawed. "Now, I've got to go have a word with the QM, be back here in 25" He headed off towards the door, leaving her by the dropship. She paused for a moment, thinking, then rushed off to the armoury.

They met back at the dropship in less than 20 minutes, hauling crates and boxes into the crew bay of the Pelican. Luckily for them, the slip-space drive wasn't the only modification. This model of the workhorse aircraft was considerably bulkier than the norm. They stacked the bay high with weapons, ammunition, rations and four MJOLNIR Mobile Armour Assembly Rig. The machines, which looked like industrial clothes washers, would build the powerful MJOLNIR armour systems around a Spartan in minutes. They also convinced the QM to part with two M274 Mongoose ATVs, which they attached to the ship's magnetic grapple. Jake brought over a black crate marked SENTINEL, and placed it in the hold. Satisfied, he turned to his team and grinned a fraction.

"Alright, everything on board?" He asked, checking the mountain of crates which occupied three quarters of the space in the bay.

They all nodded.

Jake nodded back "Okay, Sabina, you get in the cockpit and fire her up, I need to have a word with Rachel and Josef" He said, giving the older Spartan a meaningful look. She understood and quickly moved into the shadows. Jake approached them, taller than both of them by a clear foot. "Look, I'm going to level with you. Most of us Spartan IIs didn't even know that you guys existed until very recently, and a lot of us were sceptical about the deployment of your predecessors." He looked them both in the eye, one after the other, and saw determination and courage in them. "But we're here to do a job, and I'm fairly sure that the brass is going to be scrutinizing us very closely. You've been through the same training as me and Spartan 211, so you're in the club." He cricked his neck. "Just thought I'd get that out of the way with."

Josef was the first to speak "Understood sir, loud and clear"

Rachel just nodded, swallowing.

Jake turned back to the drop ship as the thrusters roared into life, he walked over to the rear door, with the others in tow. He climbed aboard, then offered his hand to each of the younger Spartans, pulling them in. Rachel and Josef strapped themselves in, and Jake walked past them into the cockpit, taking a seat in the co-pilot's chair. The screens before him showed that the SS drive was operating nominally, their payload weight was just under the limit, and that the hull was air-tight. He put on the flight helmet, and answered the hail from the _Marie Antoinette_'s Control Centre.

"This is Vice Admiral Yao, the corridor is clear, exo-solar jump is approved. Operation is online, happy hunting Spartans" She sounded excited, and Jake could hear the busy activity of the Control Centre

in the background. Even in supposed peace, the ONI Prowler Fleet never rested.

Sabina answered the hail "Affirmative, slip space drive is fully functional, hull is sealed, preparing for jump." She tapped a few buttons on her console, gripping the control stick in one hand. The engines spooled up, rising in pitch and volume, filling the dropship with noise. The ship smoothly lifted off from the hangar floor, moving slowly towards the massive steel doors. As they smoothly retracted, a shimmering wall of energy took its place. Forerunner shield technology was a hundred times more efficient than the UNSCs leading efforts. The shield maintained the vacuum seal around the door's edge, but allowed physical objects through.

The Pelican manoeuvred through the shield and out into space. The sliding armoured doors slid into place behind them, completing the image of a stealth prowler. The angular surfaces and matte-black colour of the small craft behind them helped to reduce the radar silhouette of the ship to nothing. The triple-thickness Titanium armour plating covering the hull concealed any electromagnetic signals emanating from within. She was a real stealth vessel, absolutely undetectable.

But the sight of the vessel was dwarfed as the dropship rotated, so that the rear viewscreen was facing away from the Marie-Antoinette, down towards the birthplace of humanity. The planet hung there, green plains, emerald forests, golden deserts, deep blue oceans, pale tundra. All of it swooped beneath them, the bastion of hope for humanity. Six months had passed since hostilities had ceased, and the galaxy had started to take shape once more, and now they had to leave again.

Sabina accelerated smoothly away from the planet, making it to the jump point in 25 minutes, at which point she killed the engines. She looked over at Jake and nodded, activating the slip-space drive with one flick of a switch. Jake put in the point co-ordinates of the star system, at which time a low humming noise started up near the back of the ship, getting louder and louder, rocking the small craft. Jake unstrapped himself from his seat, pushing himself up in the zero-gravity and pulled himself through the cockpit door into the cramped bay, the two Spartans sat in their seats, looking almost bored.

Sabina's voice came over the intercom as the rumbling became louder, accompanied by a high whining. "Jump in 30 seconds" Jake strapped himself into the harness next to Rachel, expertly securing the complex straps. He noticed that the others now looked slightly nervous.

"How many jumps have you done?" Asked Jake, securing a loose strap on Rachel's harness.

"Two" Replied Josef, smirking slightly, enjoying Jake's shocked face. "We'll manage, sir"

Rachel chimed in, amused "One to get us to boot camp, one to get us to Earth"

Jake sat in silence, revelling in this new information.

His musings were cut short by Sab's voice over the intercom again
"Receiving any final messages, jump in 5â€|4â€|3â€|2â€|1"

As she began her final countdown, the lights in the rear cabin flickered and the whole fuselage shuddered and creaked as the ship punched a hole through the fabric of space. Stars danced in front of Jake's eyes briefly, and he noticed Rachel and Josef shaking their heads, clearing their vision. After 10 seconds of disorientation, the ride smoothed out as they entered slip space, an eerie black limbo. Sab switched on the artificial gravity generator, and Jake felt his boots meet the floor with a heavy thunk. He whipped off his harness, grinning at the young Spartans. "We'll have a more thorough briefing here in a sec, let me just get the Intel the Vice Admiral's sent us."

They nodded, popping the quick release on their harnesses, standing and stretching.

Jake moved into the cockpit once more, standing at the co-pilot's console and scanning the encrypted message that had come through just before they entered slip-space. He glanced over at Sabina, who was busy interacting with the Pelican's navigational AI. "How long until we reach the Sigmus system?"

She looked up "5 hours, the AI's got it all sorted, I'm just slowing it down apparently" She raised her eyebrow slightly.

He stifled a laugh, grabbing a data pad from the console and walking towards the door. "Come on, we've got five hours to kill, might as well come up with a plan while we've got some down time." She checked over the instruments in front of her, then stood and walked into the crew bay behind him. Even with the massive amount of equipment stuffed inside the space, there was still room enough at the back for the four Spartans to sit opposite each other. Jake laid the data pad on the floor, cuing the device to project a 3D holographic image of Sigmus IV in the space between them.

"Sigmus IV, this class-3 planet is about three quarters Earth size, but the iron core is much denser, leading to a surface gravity of about 1.1 times that of Earth's. There are two main continents, both of which are heavily covered by thick rainforest. Atmospheric Oxygen is 22%, so breathable, and temperatures average at about 301 degrees Kelvin. Day length is 20 hours, one orbital period is 500 days." He paused, letting the information appear in green text next to the holographic image. "Three weeks ago, a large covenant force landed on the planet, at these co-ordinates." The hologram zoomed in on an area of land close to the planet's equator, showing orbital imagery of smoothly curved Covenant ships settled on the surface. "Their intentions are unknown, but we have strong reason to believe that this group is a splinter sect of the old Covenant religion, in which all forerunner technology and ruins are religiously significant. This could mean that they have discovered forerunner remnants on the planet, but we can't say for certain. That's why we're here." The image highlighted the occupied area, then zoomed out slightly, putting a red dot over an area of higher ground approximately 10 kilometres east of the Covenant force. "We are to establish a reconnaissance position overlooking the force and observe their activities."

Rachel raised a hand

Jake looked taken aback "This isn't a classroom Spartan, what is it?"

"Sir, what happens if they have found forerunner tech, is this a retrieval or are we just to report back to command?" she asked, frowning slightly

Jake considered for a second "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it, for now we're just there to settle in and observe." He glanced over at the mound of weapons and ammunition. "However, if we need to, we'll cause those hinge-heads a whole heap of trouble."

They all settled down for the next few hours. Sabina and Rachel retired to the cockpit. Josef lay across a row of seats and slept. Jake retrieved his SRS99-S5 rifle from the cargo and polished it, paying attention to each individual component.

The slip-space journey passed in a blur, and after a moment of disorientation, they re-joined normal space. All of the Spartans crowded into the cockpit, looking upon their new home for the next few weeks. Jake smiled slyly, feeling the thrill of a mission creeping up on him.

"Petty Officer, take us into geosynchronous orbit, we have prep work to do."

2. Chapter 2: Preparation

Jacob-209 gazed down upon the planet Sigmus IV, its two continents the deepest emerald, with sparse mountain ranges carving their way through the dense jungle. The small ice caps glinting at the poles, leading into the deep blue oceans, scattered with islands. He looked around the cockpit of the modified Pelican Dropship at the three other Spartans staring over the planet. Sabina-211 glanced at the planet for a few seconds, before turning her attention to the instruments in front of her, manoeuvring the craft into a geo-synchronous orbit around the 4th planet of the distant Sigmus star system. The other two soldiers, Josef-G167 and Rachel-G023, stared for much longer, this being only the third or fourth world they had seen from this height, and the only one untouched by the ravages of war.

He tore his gaze away, slapping the shoulder of his fellow Spartan-II. "Well done Sab, let me know when we've established orbit." He turned to the other two, "Which one of you wants to help me?" He asked, already knowing the answer.

Rachel beat Josef to the punch, jumping forward. "I'll do it sir." She stated, looking eager

"But you don't know what I'm doing yet?" Jake questioned, grinning slightly

She paused for a second, before replying "Irrelevant sir, if it needs doing, I'll do it."

He nodded curtly, signalling her to get into the crew bay. He turned to Josef "Don't worry Spartan, there'll be plenty to do once we get

planetside"

The Spartan nodded, before sitting down in the co-pilots chair, assisting Sabina in the complex calculations needed to sustain an orbit. Jake walked into the crew bay, sealing the cockpit door behind him. He approached the boxes marked "SENTINEL", releasing one from its strapping.

Rachel grabbed another, hauling it toward the bay door. "What's the plan sir?" She asked, setting it down gently.

"We have no comms, up to date imagery or warning systems out here in the outback, so these little beauties..." He tapped the trio of black crates with his boot, "â€¦ Will be our SATCOM for the mission. We put them in orbit, and they'll provide satellite comms, be available to get accurate satellite imagery of the surface, and give us warning of enemy ships moving in-system."

She nodded, smiling slightly. "And how do we get them into orbit? She asked, piling the fourth and final crate at the door

He nodded towards the Mobile Armour Assemblies. "We suit up and push them out the back. We'll have to momentarily speed up the ship while we push them out, otherwise they won't be in a stable orbit, but we've got Sabina and Josef working in the cockpit for that." He grabbed the snaking power cables from the back of the units and plugged them in to the line of sockets recessed into the ceiling of the bay.

Rachel nodded, moving over to the controls on her unit, tapping in her serial number, before stepping into the machine, allowing the armatures to build the suit of MJOLNIR power-assisted body armour around her, plate by plate, piece by piece. Jake typed in his own number and stepped inside, and the machine came to life. It whirred and buzzed, the small arms delivering plates of armour and fusion cells to his body, other arms screwing the pieces together, tightening recessed fasteners. The assembly smoothly and methodically encased him in ceramic-metal composite, building the half-tonne armour system in a little over 20 minutes. As the machine lowered the helmet, Jake reached up to grab it, stepping out from the oversized washing machine, holding his helmet under his arm.

Rachel stepped out from her own machine, clad in her own armour, her footsteps heavy on the metal. She stood a foot shorter than the older Spartan, and clipped her own helmet onto her belt. She was wearing a modified version of the Scout armour system, the helmet pointed and angular, almost razor sharp. She had customised the colour scheme, base paint deep emerald green, with orange highlights emblazoned on the combat skin and over her visor. He himself wore a standard Mark VI MJOLNIR suit, olive green painted, with a pale gold visor.

She looked his armour up and down, eyebrows raised "Mark VI? Very different from the Mark V" She whispered, nodding approvingly.

He gave a thumbs up "Definitely, more expensive than a frigate, shield charge time is almost nil, same as your GEN2 Scout." He donned his helmet, sealing the suit from the outside world, completing the image of the fearless god of war that the UNSC had portrayed all Spartans to be.

Rachel nodded, unclipping her own helmet and sliding it easily on to her head, the neck seal hissing. She now looked like an armoured shark, lethal, razor-edged and menacing. She depolarised her visor, visibly happy to be inside the armour.

Jake marched over to the cockpit door, buzzing the intercom. "Sab, depressurise and kill the grav generator, we're suited up in here." There was a pause, then Sabina's clear Eastern European tones came through the helmet speakers.

"Roger that, decompressing crew bay now" She spoke, and the vents in the walls hissed as the air was released into the vacuum of space. At the same time, the pair lifted off from the floor, the boxes and crates kept down by their harnesses. Rachel gave him a quick thumbs up, and a small air meter popped up in the HUD, indicating that the two Spartans had an hour before the air supply in their suits ran out. Plenty of time.

Rachel punched the door control and they opened silently, revealing a view of the blackness of space. "Magnetising" Rachel said as her boots slammed to the floor of the bay. Jake did the same, and he clunked to the floor. He walked slowly towards the crates, opening the first one with his combat knife. He gripped the smooth black box in one hand, pressing a smooth button on its surface, and a red blinking light started flashing. He handed the satellite to Rachel slowly, keeping to zero-gravity procedures. The device was then gently propelled out of the open door, drifting away in perfect geosynchronous orbit.

They performed this operation three more times at different intervals around the planet, the dropship manoeuvring 90 degrees around the axis before taking up a stable orbit and deploying the next satellite. When the last one was in position, Josef checked that the signal from each probe was strong.

"They are beginning to do a detailed map of the planet's surface, real time imagery online." He confirmed.

Jake nodded at Rachel as the crew bay re-pressurised and gravity was restored. "Good work, now let's let the others suit up while we take her in"

Sabina and Josef filed out of the cockpit, Jake and Rachel took their places, and began slowly guiding the Pelican into the planet's atmosphere. As they approached the point of no return, the other two strode into the small cockpit. Sabina stood as tall as Jake, in standard Mark VI armour apart from the shoulder pads, which had been replaced by ODSI style pads. Her armour was matte-grey with a forest green visor. Josef had opted for a set of EVA armour, the smooth panoramic visor a silver-blue colour, with sapphire-blue paint covering the surfaces.

"Buckle your seat belts, we're burning atmosphere in 5" Rachel said, strapping the co-pilot's harness tightly around her belt. As they entered Sigmus VI's upper atmosphere, the view before them became tinted orange, then yellow as the incredible frictional forces cooked the tiny craft. External temperature quickly rose to incredible heights. The ship began to shake and shudder violently, even more so than when entering slip space. But she held. After 45 seconds of bone-shaking vibrations, the view outside cleared, minus a few scorch

marks on the plexi-glass. The ride stabilised, and the whine of the engines overpowered the whoosh of re-entry.

They soared through the high-altitude cloud formations, dropping quickly as they approached their LZ. They crested a long mountain range and swooped down the other side of the peaks, sticking close to the jagged landscape, heading towards the thick jungle ahead. According to the satellite imagery being transmitted to the ship, they were rapidly approaching the Covenant fleet, but none of the Spartans had spotted it yet.

Suddenly, after travelling at tree top height for 50 miles, they suddenly found themselves high in the air as the ground fell rapidly away from beneath them as they entered into an enormous crater, the forest falling 100 metres or so before continuing, leaving a sheer cliff edge behind them. At the northern end of the crater, the natural topography fell to the level of the crater, forming a horse-shoe shape 20 kilometres wide. As Jake dropped altitude, they all looked through the viewscreen, sharing a collective gasp.

Over a dozen alien ships hugged the ground about 10 kilometres in front of them, their distinctive organic, curved shapes poking above the canopy. Jake counted quickly, correlating with orbital imagery, and counted one battlecruiser, three cruisers, four destroyers, half a dozen frigates and a few corvettes, all arranged in a grid formation, just above the surface.

"By the stars, this must be the biggest concentration of covenant hardware in the galaxy" Whispered Josef, slight bitterness creeping into his voice

Jake pulled the dropship hard left and whizzed back along their flight path, keeping low. "Don't want to get blasted out of the sky, now, do we?" He muttered, looping around the circumference of the crater towards the open end of the horseshoe, slowly coming to a halt on a raised section of the jungle overlooking the valley. Jake set the Pelican down in a small clearing in the forest canopy, extending the landing gear and shutting down the engines, he turned to the other Spartans, smiling through his depolarised visor. "Welcome to Sigmus IV"

As the dust and leaf litter settled around the craft, the Spartans filed out of the back of it, stepping out onto the forest floor. Josef quickly threw a camouflage net over the ship, masking its distinctive outline. They gathered just outside the ship's doors, under the hanging M274 Mongooses.

"Rachel, set up motion detectors at 50, 100 and 150 metres radius." Jake said, as she nodded and rushed inside the ship and grabbed the small devices, hurrying off into the forest. "Sabina, scout for water, rivers, streams, whatever, we need it as fuel for the ATVs". She nodded and ran off towards the North, away from the crater, using satellite navigation to guide her to the nearest water source.

He turned to Josef "Let's get this gear out of here" The younger Spartan nodded, and they hauled all of their equipment out of the back of the dropship, which was infinitely easier in their power-assisted armour, and laid them out on the ground underneath a tall, pine-like tree. Stacks upon stacks of weapon crates, ammunition, food supplies and other equipment stood in neat

arrangements. Jake slung a nano-fibre sheet over the tree branch, tying it to a hardpoint on the dropship's tail to provide a shady area between the ship's rear and the ring of trees surrounding it. They finished the camp by setting up the sleeping area in the Pelican's bay.

Satisfied, Jake and Josef began retrieving the weapons from their crates and carefully assembling them, resting them against the crates they used as chairs. As they worked, Jake spotted the familiar practiced efficiency in Josef's work that meant that CPO Mendez had taught him at some point. Following on this thought, he posed a question. "So, Petty Officer, how's Dr Halsey? I haven't seen her in years."

Josef stopped his work, tilting his head slightly "Halsey? I don't know who you mean, who is Halsey?"

Jake frowned inside his helmet "Dr Halsey, creator of the Spartan II programme?"

Josef shook his head slightly "Sorry sir, never met her in my life." He went back to cleaning the BR-55 in his hands.

Jake puzzled over this. The next generation of Spartans had never met Dr Halsey? He had, along with all the Spartan IIs, assumed that they were only the first of many generations of super-soldiers. And when younger sets of MJOLNIR armour started popping up across the UNSC, they'd all thought that this was the natural continuation. But according to Josef, this new generation had been produced without her. This felt wrong somehow. ONI kept their secrets well, it would seem.

His musings were interrupted by the return of Rachel, who had finished installing SOLARIS motion sensors all around the camp. She nodded at Josef, then addressed the Chief Petty Officer "Sir, I sighted banshee fliers, fast and low, scouting the edge of the crater, flight of two. They didn't spot me, but they may be aware that something's in the area."

Jake nodded slowly, putting his musings about Halsey to the back of his mind "Agreed, and we need to be one step ahead of them. I think we need to tap into their BattleNet, but we'll need a covvie comms system. That either means either stealing one, or ambushing a patrol and ripping one out of their cold dead hands." He paused "I'm all in favour for the latter, but if we do they'll tighten security."

Josef leaned forward, depolarising his visor to reveal a tight smile. "What if we take them out without firing a shot, or if we have to, we use their weapons? No proof of UNSC involvement. Of course they'll come looking for the patrol, but the terrain is tough, and if/when they do find the bodies there'll be no projectile wounds on them"

Rachel piped in "In addition, if we use some plasma weapons on them, it'll look like a fragging or something, just a tragic incident that'll have the covenant watching their backs for each other, not us." She sat down on a boulder, leaning her helmeted head on one hand, tapping her fingers on her thigh.

Jake nodded, slowly forming a plan. "I'm liking all this, but we need

more accurate recon of the terrain and enemy patrol patterns" In truth, all this had occurred to him 10 minutes ago, but he wanted to see what these Spartan-IIIs could come up with. So far, they'd done well, analysing the problem and working out half a solution within minutes. "When Sabina gets back we'll plan it out more thoroughly" He said, checking his chronograph, 90 minutes till sundown. He stood up from the lip of the Pelican's bay and walked over to the rations, fishing three boxes out of a crate, sealing the lid after. "So then, who wants the Spaghetti Farbonizarre? Or what passes for it."

Jake felt a little tension ease away instantly. Griping about the state of the Navy's food bonded all soldiers together, united them in complaint. Rachel snorted, waving the packet of dried pasta away "I'll pass sir, I had one on the trip here, almost killed me" Her face twitched in a smile, as Jake offered the packet to Josef, who stared at it like it was unexploded ordinance.

"Ummm, yeah, no thanks sir, I'd rather march into the centre of that covenant fleet wearing a high visibility jacket" He waved the package away, shivering slightly.

Jake tossed them the other two meals, shaking his head slowly "You youngsters don't know how good you've got it, Sab and I had to survive off of those high calorie bars for three weeks on one op. Those were bad times."

That generated winces from the others. No one deserved a fate like that. The bars had enough pure energy to last two days conservatively, but they tasted like a horse's arse. As he sat back down on the Pelican's ramp, Sabina jogged back into the clearing, nodding welcome to the Spartan-IIIs, before grabbing herself some rations and sitting down further along the ledge, leaning against the inner wall of the bay.

"There's a couple of rivers a click down the hill, it opens up down there, more meadows than forest. And there's wildlife, huge bovine quadrupeds, and carrion avians as well, not many fish though, so its meals from packets for now" She took off her helmet and laid it on the floor next to her, quickly eating the high-energy food. The others did the same, twisting on their seats to face the back of the ship. Jake pushed his meal to the side, popping his lid off and clipping it to his belt.

"Right then, now we're fed and watered, we need to get a hold of a Covenant communicator, so that we can piggyback their comms and listen in." He looked round quickly "Now, one avenue of achieving that is to take out a patrol and steal theirs, but we need to do it without revealing that UNSC forces are on the planet. Of course, they may have been able to track our dropship since we arrived, but I think we were missed, after all, we've not been shot out of the sky or ambushed yet."

He consulted his data pad, the SATCOM imagery that the SENTINEL system had been capturing over the last few hours showed the terrain down to a metre resolution. Activating the projector, Jake displayed the horseshoe crater, complete with covenant fleet hanging overhead, into the air just outside the door. "Right, we'll have to complete the recon ourselves, individual patrol movements are a little hard to spot from orbit, but we've got a good map of the terrain already, so that should make things easier. We'll take all of tomorrow to recon,

until we're absolutely sure of the patterns, then we'll set an ambush in motion tomorrow night. Any questions?"

Josef sat up slightly. "Sir, if it's okay with you, Rachel and I can do some preliminary recon tonight, we can handle covert" He looked up beseechingly. "We'll just do some estimates on troop count, deployment, shadow a patrol, no combat, 'From shadows we watch'" He said, quoting the ONI prowler fleet's unwritten motto.

Rachel nodded enthusiastically. "I'm up for it sir" She punched her fellow Spartan in the arm "Besides, someone's got to take care of him"

Jake thought about it, glancing discretely towards Sabina. She nodded almost imperceptibly, and he followed suit. He highlighted an area of the map, a small concentric circle that surrounded the settled covenant battlegroup. "Stay out of this area, don't take any chances, radio check every 30 minutes, surface recon only, back at 0200, understood?" He stood in front of them.

The two Spartans nodded, Josef hesitating beforehand, jamming their helmets down on top of their heads, saluting reflexively. "Yes sir" They chorused, before grabbing basic reconnaissance equipment and hurtling out of the clearing down the slope, into the jungle. Jake was impressed, even with their weaker bones and lower muscle density, the smaller figures still managed to reach the same speeds as a Spartan-II.

He turned to Sabina, smiling "They grow up so fast" He smirked, stepping into the crew bay towards the beds at the far end.

Sabina cracked a smile, watching their progress on the holo-map. Jake shifted the projection into the bay, sitting down on one of the seats along one wall. They all appeared as Green dots on the image, two staying still on top of the ridge line, two rapidly descending the hill, heading towards the mess of red dots that the SENTINEL system had identified as hostile. Sabina shifted towards the front of the bay, polishing her sidearm absent-mindedly.

"What do you think of the next generation so far?" Jake asked, staring into the projection

She took her time answering the question, deftly removing the sidearm's receiver. "I think they're eager. Maybe too eager. They've had little to no real combat experience." She shrugged "But they're alright, don't forget, they're still Spartans"

"But not Halsey's" Jake noted "Josef had never heard of her, don't you think that's odd?"

She hesitated, gripping the polishing rag tightly "She'd never knowingly abandon the Spartan Project. You know that. So the question is, why isn't she on board with III?"

Jake shook his head slightly "I don't know, but the internal politics of ONI is nothing if not turbulent. Maybe she doesn't even know about it..."

She paused again "There's something else. Josef and I got talking when you and Rachel were deploying SENTINEL. We were identifying the

specific ships in the group, and one of them, the destroyer _Faithful Deity _has been logged as taking part in the glassing of New Hamburgâ€| "

Jake sighed, recalling information from Josef's file, finishing her sentence "â€| which is the birthplace of Josef-G167, who, as a 6 year old child, watched his home planet fall"

Sabina nodded "You should have seen his reaction, he gripped the table so hard it left dents, and he wasn't even in armour at the timeâ€| "

They were interrupted by a radio hail emanating from the ship's internal speakers "Gamma-One-Six-Seven calling in, approaching hostile AO, over"

Sabina shot Jake a glance, and pressed the call button "Roger G167, Sierra-Two-One-One copy, over and out"

She released the button "Another odd thing about our new colleagues, have you seen the meds they're on? Cyclo-trixine, dipentathylamine, lorazomol? Those are all anti-psychotics and psych mediators. Both of them, once a day. Something's not right." She folded her arms, frowning slightly.

Jake shifted uneasily "Well, we weren't perfect either, they'll do fine. If we do this right, we could form our own Unit. We could do with their skillset." He settled down in his seat for a restless night, troubled. "If the Spartan-IIIs are meant to be our replacement, our days are numbered, there are over three hundred of them right now, and there are less than a dozen functioning Spartan-IIs." He shrugged

She tapped on the thigh of her armour, eyes dark and brooding. "You have been called upon to serve" She recited, the first words Dr Halsey had told them coming easily into her mind.

"You will be the defender of Earth and all her Colonies" Jake muttered, remembering all the worlds he had seen smoking and burned. "We did it, Sab. Earth is safe"

"For now." She responded, pointing at the covenant ships displayed on the projection. "Unless these guys get their hands on some forerunner tech, that is."

He nodded. "Whatever happens to us, to the other IIs, we stay together." He made the age-old Spartan greeting, the tracing of two lines over his mouth with the two first fingers on his right hand.

She returned the gesture silently, jaw set. It would take a lot more than 300 Spartans to destroy their legacy.

3. Chapter 3: Ambush

Rachel-G023 landed on the muddy ground with a heavy thud, her power-assisted armour propelling her towards the rocky outcrop on top of the steep hill that she and Josef-G167 had been slowly ascending for the last few minutes. She crouched behind the large boulder,

buzzing Josef on the TEAMCOM. He quickly darted from behind his cover and joined her.

They had both spotted the Covenant patrol making their way through a deep ravine in the landscape, and had shadowed their movements for kilometres. The small group of aliens made their way painstakingly slowly through the terrain, and following them stealthily was no easy feat. She glanced at her chronometer: 01:30. They'd been following this group for an hour, and had their route pretty well mapped out.

She dared a quick look over the ridgeline, and spotted the patrol easily. The bright coloured armour was no camouflage aid, and Rachel quickly tallied their numbers; two tall, loping Sanghelli at the front, leading a group of a dozen diminutive Ungoy chittering amongst themselves. Plasma rifles, pistols, energy swords. Nothing they and the others couldn't handle.

Josef peeked over himself, gripping his BR-85 rifle tightly. "I hate this recon work, every fibre in my being tells me to pop these genocidal freaks and damn the consequences" He set his rifle down on the rock, sighting the lead Elite quickly, his finger not quite on the trigger.

Rachel tapped his shoulder, worried "Come on Josef, don't do anything stupid, we've done our job, let's get out of here"

He didn't relax, breathing heavily. "What are the chances that one of them down there killed your family? They all participated in the slaughter of billions, they massacred indiscriminately." He depolarised his visor and turned to look at her, his eyes wild and angry.

She sighed "I don't know, but right now we need to remain calm. Now isn't the time to strike. That comes later. Why do you think we're here? We supply the intel, then the Navy blasts them out of the sky. It's all about logistics, we don't have many hulls left, so we pick each battle carefully." She calmly reasoned with him, and he withdrew his weapon from the ridge, shoulders relaxing slightly.

"Thanks Rachel" He muttered as he turned away from the edge and started backing slowly down the slope, his visor becoming opaque once more. She took a few last snapshots with her helmet camera, highlighting the patrol's overall formation, before a beep on her TEAMCOM caught her attention.

Josef waved her over, his domed EVA helmet reflecting her silhouette back at her. She moved towards him, her armour actuators smoothly assisting her motion. Josef tapped his wrist, an archaic gesture in itself, wristwatches had been antiquated for years. She nodded silently, before they both slunk away from the cliff, down a slope towards a thin woodland. Once safely away from the patrol, Rachel buzzed him on the radio. "So, what do you think? With the CPO and PO I think we could pull it off."

Josef marched along between the tall tree trunks, sliding his BR-55 onto the magnetic holder on his back. "Sure thing, we may need some natural assistance, but it's feasible" he said, his earlier lapse in judgement seemingly a thing of the past. They broke into a steady jog. "What do you think about them?"

"Who, the CPO and PO? I think they've seen more combat than half the UNSC" She replied, ducking and weaving between the trees.

"Don't you get the feeling that this is just some huge test? That they're judging whether or not we can match up to them?"

She thought for a moment "I think they're being tested as much as we are. I mean, nearly all of the IIs are KIA, that's got to hurt, and you heard some of the DIs back on Onyx, they're all supposed to be crazy."

He grunted assent. "True, but Lieutenant Ambrose called the IIs the finest fighting force ever established." He shook his head "But we shouldn't be thinking of 'them' and 'us', we're all in the same boat, protecting Earth. Although he did offer us those ration packs, so he can't be too fond of us"

She laughed "He ate it afterwards, so we can deduce that Spartan-IIs have stomachs of steel"

He chuckled, running through a small stream, splashing through the murky water. As she did the same, a proximity alert flashed over her HUD, satellite monitoring had detected a flight of Phantoms heading in their direction. Immediately, without thought she threw herself under a fallen tree, sliding her BR-55 from her back, charging the handle. She felt the cool stream rushing over her body, and felt the scraping of the tree bark against her shoulder as she lay face-down in the shallow water. Josef ducked under the cover of an overhanging tree, cocking his own weapon, crouching ankle-deep in the stream, shoulder pressed into the steep earthen banks on which the tree was rooted.

The high pitched whines of multiple impulse drives approached. The two Spartans were absolutely still, observing radio silence. The chances that any ship had spotted them were tiny, but they didn't intend on giving the Covenant any help in finding them. The whining and whisper-like noises coming from the two insect-like dropships getting louder, and suddenly they swooped overhead, briefly illuminating the stream with pale blue light. Rachel could see a golden-armoured Elite sitting on the edge of the platform where a plasma cannon normally rested.

The dropships hovered around the vicinity for 5 long minutes, circling like vultures, before peeling away and heading back towards the centre of the covenant fleet

She and Josef stayed absolutely still for another ten minutes, before slowly extracting themselves from their hiding places and moving swiftly off into the forest, snaking their way back towards the Pelican, trying to throw off any potential pursuers. As they approached the foot of the hill, on top of which the ship was secreted, another proximity alarm started in both their helmets as a trio of low-flying Banshee fighters swooped overhead on their regular patrol pattern, scarring the sky with pink/purple trails in their wake. They threw themselves towards the nearest trees for 30 seconds, before resuming their ascent, alerting Spartan-211 of their approach over the radio. As they entered their makeshift camp, the Chief Petty Officer waved them inside the dropship's crew bay, face set. As they entered, the door slid smoothly shut, sealing the ship entirely, and

Rachel noticed that none of the inner lights were on.

They saluted quickly, and Jacob nodded, before sitting down, gesturing for them to do the same. "So, Petty Officers, result?" He asked, his voice calm and neutral

Sabina's voice came from the cockpit "Those Banshees have RTB'd, restoring OPSNormal" The cabin lights flickered on.

Rachel reached up and unsealed her helmet, setting it down next to her as she sat opposite him. "We tracked a covenant patrol for approximately one hour, they seem to have a certain affinity for patrolling the ravines and trenches in the crater, the one we followed was moderately well armed, two Elites, twelve Grunts, the usual."

Josef, helmet-less as well, spoke "A couple of phantoms paid us a visit, must have triggered a ground-based motion detector. We hunkered down and they passed us by."

The CPO thought for a few moments, before calling out to the other Spartan-II "Hey, Sab? Do the covenant have the whole crater rigged for motion?"

After a short pause, her reply rang out "Negative, just around their ships and bases, key points of interest."

Jake pondered this for a second "We'd only set up motion detectors around places of importance, so why did they detect you two that far away from their bases?" He rested his chin on his hands, frowning. "I'll think about that for a while, you two should get some rest." He motioned to the carbon-fibre bunks set up against the back wall.

Rachel nodded, suddenly exhausted, the stress of nearly blowing the whole operation had drained her of energy, and, looking over at her comrade, it looked like it had had a similar effect on him.

Jacob stood and patted each of them on the shoulder "Good work Spartans, you carried out your mission, avoided enemy capture, and I'm sure there's something up with those motion detectors." He walked towards the cockpit. "Get some sleep, we'll wake you in a few hours."

Rachel saluted once more, then stumbled over to a bunk, which groaned under the weight of her and her armour. She drifted off to sleep without another word, and was out in under 20 minutes.

Jake slid into the seat next to Sabina, sighing. "Well, they did well, all things considered."

Sabina looked up from the tactical display. "So I take it from that that we're not going to tell them how close they came to being glassed? The Phantoms requested the destroyer Sanctified Martyr to bombard the whole area just in case, over an unencrypted channel no less."

Jake shuddered "No, I'll tell them, but not right now, they're coming down off of the adrenaline, let them sleep for now. I want to know why they rigged that area up, and why the destroyer didn't fire when

requested to, anything on the thermal scan?"

Sabina taped a few instructions into the computer, and the tactical map displayed took on a series of coloured bands. The suspect area showed no abnormalities in this spectrum. "Nothing on IR, let's try UV" she muttered, layering the map with another filter, showing nothing out of the ordinary. "Nothing on that either, no abnormal EM radiation at all." She stared intensely at the map, as if willing the completely normal patch of ground to spontaneously reveal its secrets.

Suddenly, an idea came into his mind. He activated his HUD's file system, and trawled quickly through the on-board database for records on Forerunner ruins. He found a series of files, written by one , detailing the discovery of mysterious Fore-runner structures beneath the surface of Reach, shortly before its fall. In her own words; "â€|These enigmatic structures were only discovered as a result of an Iron Mining Corporation, which stumbled upon them after detecting large magnetic fluctuations. When Section Three closed down the operation, our own analysts confirmed that the strange material's magnetic flux oscillated with a frequency identical to that of Reach's own magnetic field. Upon further investigation, we discovered that in some areas, the strong, highly localised magnetic field was detectable on the surfaceâ€|"

"Sab, have a read of this" Jake whispered, sending the file to the cockpit's display. Moments later, her gauntleted hands were already flying across the keyboard, layering over a display of magnetic field strength over the map. There, 200 metres from where a Covenant motion sensor detected Rachel and Josef, a bright red dot marked an area of incredibly high magnetic flux density. He slapped her shoulder, grinning. "Got it. I'd bet my armour that there's a Forerunner construct right under there." He paused, frowning as a thought occurred to him

Apparently the same thought had occurred to Sabina, because she widened the magnetic field filter to the whole crater. "So why isn't this area being excavated right now, why just one motion sensor?" She muttered. A second later they had their answer, as dozens upon dozens of red lights winked into existence, scattered amongst the round area, with no discernable pattern to their placement.

Jake whistled lowly. "I'll be damned." The blinking display informed him that over one hundred and fifty six points of interest were present in the round base of the crater. "And these are only the ones detectable on the surface." He chewed this information over. "That explains why the _Sanctified Martyr_ didn't fire on them either, no sane Shipmaster would destroy holy relics like that."

"Should I inform the Admiral that we've confirmed Forerunner constructs?" She began compiling a short message, including a highlighted copy of Dr Halsey's notes from Reach as well as a copy of the magnetic readings they had recorded.

Jake nodded "Send it now, and we should get a reply in the morning" He wasn't sure what the Admiral's response would be. They had effectively completed their mission, they had discovered strong evidence of Forerunner structures under the covenant fleet. However, the deduction had been too easy, and there was no need for Spartans to be deployed on a simple intelligence gathering mission. He had a

sneaking suspicion that reconnaissance was only part one of their mission.

As the message sent, Sabina stood up, cricking her neck loudly

"I'll be first watch, you get some sleep, rotate in 5 hours" Jake said, taking her place in the pilot's seat. She nodded and exited the cockpit, Jake heard her slump down onto a bunk before he slid the door shut, turning to the screens in front of him. Dozens of small contacts moved around the alien ships, Phantoms, the older, tuning-fork shaped Spirit dropships, Banshees. The Covenant menace never slept. He scrolled through the data streaming in from the SENTINEL system; nothing unexpected, no slip-space activity, no unusual movements on the surface. His attention wandered to the stack of information received just before their jump, FLEETCOM memos that he hadn't had time to read up until now.

There was civil unrest on Sanghelios, Insurrectionists had blown up a UNSC ammunition stockpile on the colony of Firenze. Now the main bulk of the Covenant had fallen, people tended to remember their old grudges. He settled down, poring through the information for several hours, keeping one eye on the tactical map, briefly distracted by the beautiful sunrise peeking through the trees, one of Sigmus IV's moons rising in the opposite end of the sky.

Five minutes before he was due to awaken the others, the cockpit door slid smoothly open and Josef entered, looking through the front viewscreen out towards the alien battlegroup, the early morning sunlight illuminating the hulls harshly, throwing long shadows over the forest.

"What's the plan for today sir?" He asked, still facing forwards.

Jake brought up the tactical map on the screen in front of them. "Well, we're hoping to ambush a patrol early afternoon, which means we all have to plan the operation out, pick a suitable location etc. Then we're stuck on long-distance recon for the rest of the day, they'll be on high alert after their patrol goes missing"

He nodded, before tearing his eyes away from the screen and entering the bay. Jake closed the systems in the cockpit down before following. Sabina and Rachel were already standing at ease by the raised ramp, helmets tucked under arms. As the male Spartans joined them, Jake outlined the day's objectives.

"We're making final preparations this morning, pending a response from Vice Admiral Yao, so Josef and Rachel will take point as we make our way to the ravine, let's move" He said, flicking a switch to lower the ramp. They all filed out of the Pelican and collected weapons, Jake opted for a custom-made MA5D with suppressor, and an M45D shotgun, Josef and Sabina went for standard-issue BR-85HB rifles and M6D sidearms, and Sabina collected her prized SRS99-S5 Sniper rifle and an M7S silenced sub machine gun. Hopefully the weapons would be superfluous to their needs for today, but if trouble came their way, they'd be prepared.

Weapons and ammunition collected, Jake closed the dropship up and holstered his shotgun on his back, turning to face the others. He nodded curtly, before unclipping his helmet from his belt and donning

it, running a full system's check. The others followed suit, and soon Jake saw green status symbols lighting up in his HUD, and the IFF tag system came online, outlining each of the Spartans with a green aura, as well as painting their motion sensor contacts green as well.

Satisfied, he sent a burst transmission, which was followed by three winking acknowledgement lights on his HUD. As one, the Spartans formed up in the edge of the clearing, and the two smaller figures lead them down the steep slope of the hill, towards the ravine. Theoretically they could chat over the TEAMCOM channel with no ill effects, but there was an edge of seriousness in the air, everyone was utterly focussed on their objective. Perfect.

They travelled for an hour, moving swiftly through dense woodland, over thin streams and through grassy meadows, signalling to each other by hand movements only. They soon reached a long clearing in the thin forest they were walking through, and the ground sharply ascended, rising to about thirty metres above them, Josef signalled once, and then began to slowly climb up the steep banks, which were dotted with visible boulders and a few hardy trees. As they climbed, Jacob checked the SENTINEL data on his HUD, no large movements of vehicles or forces within their area. Nothing on his motion sensor either.

He crested the hill, and looked down into the ravine. A sheer cliff fell down before him, going down 50 metres below their current position, 20 metres below ground level. The jagged gash in the landscape ran as far as he could see, curving slightly in towards the centre of the crater. He knew if he checked the satellite imagery that this would only be one of a network of ravines and ditches that criss-crossed the land. At the very bottom of the rocky valley, a well-worn path snaked its way along the floor where countless patrols had previously tread.

He pointed down the gap, before running back down the hill to the tree line and securing a climbing rope to a tall oak-like specimen. He tested its strength before re-joining the others, spooling out the composite cable behind him. When he reached the ridge line, he affixed a pulley system to a carbon-fibre ground anchor, before driving the structure into the earth a few metres away from the cliff edge. He clipped the cable to a hard point on his waist, backing slowly towards the edge. He saw the others preparing to attach themselves to the cable, stowing their weapons on their backs. He flashed an acknowledgement light, before leaning backwards, letting the rope take the weight of his armour. It held.

As he made his descent down the rocky cliff, he paused, flashing a warning light to his comrades above. He had spotted contacts on his motion sensor. As he steadied himself against the wall, a covenant patrol rounded the corner 30 metres below him, moving slowly along the path. Grunts trailed behind the two lead Elites, punching each other and talking in their high-pitched barks. The two leaders conversed in low tones, intensely debating something. Jake knew that if they looked up, his olive-green armour would stand out like a sore thumb against the pale chalk-like wall. He waited what seemed like an eternity before the patrol moved out of sight, and he rappelled rapidly to the ground, flashing a green light.

As the last Spartan hit the floor, Jake had already formed a

semi-plan in his mind. The floor of the gulley was littered with rocks and boulders, and the walls widened about four metres above the floor, until at the base of the crevice, the walls were five metres apart, with jagged boulders and rocky debris littering the path on either side.

They all knew that another patrol would not be far behind, so they got to work. Josef and Rachel, under instruction, rolled two massive boulders from the side of the path directly onto it, effectively blocking it. The massive monoliths weighed close to two tons each, and Jake heard the actuators and servos in the pair's suits whine abrasively. After he had secured the rappelling cable to the wall and covered it with dust, he and Sabina got to work camouflaging themselves, grabbing handfuls of chalky dust from the floor and applying it to each other's armour, dulling the colours to a drab grey. Josef and Rachel did the same, until all four Spartans looked like pale impressions of warriors, ghostly figures of armoured demons. Perfect.

It was a fair bet that the next patrol would approach the site from the same direction as the previous one. As such, Jacob and Josef situated themselves about 10 metres away from the blockage so that when the patrol stopped, they would be directly behind them. They lay prone on either side of the path, seeking as much cover as possible behind rocks, and letting their pale grey coating of dust blend in with the limestone rubble around them. Sabina and Rachel positioned themselves in a similar manner, but just in front of the barrier, so that they could quickly neutralise the Elite leaders of the next patrol before they got a chance to call for help.

Everything was ready, the trap was sprung. Admittedly, it wasn't a terribly complicated plan, and there were a long list of things that could go wrong, but Jake had calmly reinforced the basic plan on them all; take out the Sanghelli first, worry about the Ungoy afterwards. They could improvise around that basic objective if necessary. They waited in these positions for the next patrol. Jake took advantage of this by checking if any messages had come through from the Admiral. Nothing had, so Jake turned his mind away from the issue, checking the squad's Bio readings. Everyone was as expected, slight increase in adrenal output, nothing out of the ordinary. God he hated the waiting.

20 long minutes passed, before Josef flashed the rest of the squad a warning light. A second later, Jake too picked up the motion sensor contacts heading their way, and flashed a confirmation light. A few seconds later, another patrol rounded the corner. A pair of Sanghelli and a dozen Ungoy, just as two elites at the front growled in frustration at the sight of the blockage, gesticulating before barking orders at the Grunts, their four-way jaws opening and closing rapidly. The whole patrol headed towards the boulders, past Jacob and Josef, who stayed absolutely still as they went. One of the Ungoy knocked a stone loose from the path, and it tumbled down the slight gradient towards the waiting Spartan. Jake breathed slowly, letting the group pass, until the entire collection of aliens was trapped unknowingly between the four Spartans. They wouldn't know what hit them. As the grunts moved forward to try and clear the path, Jake sent an action signal, and immediately received three green lights on his HUD.

As one, the four warriors moved into action. Rachel and Sabina rose,

spectre-like from their hiding places, charging at the tall elites, tackling them both to the ground. Rachel delivered an actuator-assisted uppercut to her target, snapping the tall alien's head back, dazing it. Sabina simply powered her own fist into her Elite's neck, crushing the windpipe. The powerful creature struggled wildly, scrambling with one three-fingered hand at its belt, reaching for its plasma rifle. While the two women wrestled with Sanghelli, Jacob and Josef sprinted towards the panicked Grunts, who stood there, awestruck at the sight of their leaders' struggle. Jacob quickly snapped the neck of the nearest grunt, relieving the short alien of his side arm. Josef dispatched his first target in a timely fashion, raising his captured plasma pistol at the rest of the group. Jake checked the power level on his own pistol, before firing rapidly at the bunched-up grunts, the superheated plasma cutting through their environment suits like a hot knife through butter. Grunts squealed loudly and ran for cover, falling to the floor under the dual onslaught. One Grunt pulled his weapon and fired wildly, the bolt of energy flowing over Josef's shields, causing them to flare and shimmer. Jake quickly put him down with a bolt to the head, melting through the creature's skull and igniting the methane tank on its back. The resulting explosion eviscerated the three grunts nearby, and the two male Spartans calmly finished off the last two with practiced ease. He then turned his attention to the struggling Elites. Sabina had hers under control, and was slowly asphyxiating it with her elbow, its limbs flailed, desperately trying to prize her away. Rachel was having a little more difficulty, as her captive had come round from its dazed state, and was delivering crushing blows to the side of her head with its free arm, growling and snarling like a wild animal. She jabbed at the nerve cluster on the side of its neck, sending it into spasm, and Jacob calmly strolled over. On his way, he held down the trigger on his plasma pistol, the muzzle beginning to glow bright green, heating the air around it. He crouched next to the pair, ripped the blue helmet off of the Elite, held the muzzle of the pistol against the side of its head, and fired. The now headless alien fell still, and Rachel stood up, a little dazed, staring down at the space where the proud Elite's head had once been.

Jake looked around at the carnage, a dozen dead grunts, one headless elite and one choked to death. Sabina rose from her dead Sanghelli, holding his helmet in one hand, his plasma rifle in the other. The four Spartans just stood there, splattered with brightly covered blood and dust, recovering from the adrenaline, the walls around them were painted with blood and covered in plasma scoring.

"Let's clean up" Jake whispered, and they got to work, rolling the boulders back into position and planting the captured weapons back onto their original owners. They even pried the weapons from fallen enemies' hands and 'dirtied up' the bodies, so that every plasma weapon in the canyon had fired at least one shot. Jacob attached his captured Elite helmet to his belt, Sabina ripped the communications unit out of hers before tossing the rest of the headpiece onto the sprawled Sanghelli warrior.

Just as they were about to ascend the rope and leave the bloody scene behind them, Jake received an alert through his helmet. A message from the Admiral. He quickly opened it, and the short but powerful message read: **Affirmative, confirmed possible subterranean Forerunner assets, UNSC Battle-group dispatched, ETA 20 hours. Stand by for further Intel, Vice Admiral Yao out.**

4. Chapter 4: Assembly

I wish I'd eaten Captain Hall thought, twiddling his thumbs, looking around at the menacing interior of an ONI Prowler meeting room, although from his point of view it was more like an interrogation room. He'd answered the mysterious summons, left his ship and his men to be whisked away to this stealth prowler. He couldn't spot a name on the ship's black hull when he was brought here, but everyone knew the distinctive angular shape of the _Marie Antoinette_, newest addition to the prowler fleet. He'd never wanted to mingle with the black-uniformed menace that was the Office of Naval Intelligence. Servicemen who did sometimes ended up dead, or wishing they were. However, as much as he'd wanted to avoid this, when a Vice Admiral in ONI requested your presence in person, you didn't refuse. So he came, and he'd been stuck in this claustrophobic room for ten minutes, awaiting his sentence.

The door opposite him opened silently and a petite Asian woman wearing a black uniform walked swiftly in, tapping rapidly at a datapad in her hand. He immediately rose to salute, but she waved him down and sat opposite him quickly, frowning slightly.

"As much as I love the reputation this uniform brings, Captain, I'm in a bit of a rush today, organising a Battle-Group does take a considerable amount of effort, so we'll dispense with the pleasantries." She hurried, opening up a few files on her datapad, scanning the documents. "You are Captain Lawrence Hall, commander of the Heracles-class destroyer UNSC _Hydra_, are you not?" She looked up, her emerald green eyes staring through him.

"Yes ma'am" He answered, not blinking, scratching his greying hair subconsciously

She nodded quickly "I've read your file, captain, you fought in the defence of Ariadne, Reach, and then Earth. Quite valiantly too from Admiral Cole's report." She tapped a few commands into her datapad. "I apologise for the cloak-and-dagger circumstances, the extradition from the _Hydra_ and so on, but ONI lives and breathes secrets, and this mission isn't even known about by FLEETCOM. I'm assigning you and the _Hydra_ to Battle-Group Zulu, you jump in 12 hours, any questions?"

"Just one ma'am, what is the mission?" He asked, only half expecting an answer

She smiled slyly "Asset denial, captain, that's all you need to know for now, you'll be briefed when you jump." She stood, turning her datapad off.

Hall stood quickly, saluting smartly. She returned the salute, before turning to leave. Just before she left, she turned. "Oh, and Captain? This meeting never happened" The door slid smoothly shut behind her.

As Hall walked onto the bridge, he nodded greeting at the men and women around him, waving away their salutes. "Alright then, boys and girls, ONI feels as if we're better deployed elsewhere, we are to join a Battle-Group Zulu ASAP, Lieutenant Fields, sitrep?"

Lieutenant Fields, the Navigation officer on the bridge, turned in her chair, smoothing down her uniform. "We've received co-ordinates from the Marie-Antoinette, sir, ETA 5 minutes." She turned back to her station.

Hall sat in the captain's chair, pushing his glasses up his nose. "Lieutenant Winters?"

Winters looked over his shoulder from the Engineering console. "Reactor is 80% functional sir, running a full shakedown as we go, ready to jump in 6 hours"

Hall nodded, tapping on the arm of his seat. "Harrison?"

"MACs online sir, all Archer missiles pods online, FENRIS, HAVOK and SHIVA warheads active, 50mm cannons online and fully functional sir" said Lieutenant Harrison, not taking his eyes off of his screen.

Hall nodded again, checking all of this on his own console. "Athena? Can you give me a full report on the Battle Group? I want to know what we're dealing with here."

As he spoke, a small holographic figure of a woman clad in a toga, holding a datapad in one hand and a pencil in the other, appeared alongside the main tactical screen, Ancient Greek lettering along with numbers flowing across her form, which was tinted orange.

"Aye, captain, it appears that we're not top dog in this particular group, I'm initiating handshake procedures with at least 5 other gen-4 Smart AIs, although none of them seem to like revealing too much information." She said, her slight Scottish accent becoming more evident in her annoyance. "I'll keep trying captain, but just from the hull sensors, I predict that another destroyer, a marathon-class cruiser, possibly the Babylon, two heavy frigates and two corvettes are already at the RV point. Oh, and the Marie-Antoinette is joining us" She rattled off the list. "Of course, once I'm properly briefed on our mission by the Antoinette, I'll have a full tactical situation for you."

Hall's eyes widened as the enormity of this taskforce struck him. "A Marathon class? Vice Admiral Yao means business." He frowned "Athena, how is the disappearance of several valuable hulls going to go completely unnoticed by FLEETCOM?"

Athena tapped on the surface of her holographic tablet "According to FLEETCOM data, us and the Babylon are going on routine deployments, last minute scheduling of course. I'd imagine that the rest of the group, when they join us, will be recorded as doing the same. ONI's keeping up its black reputation I see."

Hall grunted assent. Working with a 4th generation Smart AI like Athena had its quirks, but she was an invaluable asset, capable of trillions of calculations per second. She often joked that she could probably pilot the Hydra without them, and that the bridge crew really just 'slowed her down'.

Lieutenant Fields looked at the captain "We're at the RV point sir, orders from the Admiral are to hold position until the rest of the

Battle-Group forms up."

"Thank you Lieutenant, 2nd Lieutenant Mallard?"

Mallard poked her head up from the Intel booth "Aye, sir?"

"Corroborate with Athena, see if you can identify all of our comrades, but don't pry too much." He scratched his chin thoughtfully

"Aye captain." Mallard replied, turning back to the screen in front of her. Athena's holographic avatar disappeared from the central tactical screen and reappeared next to the Intel booth.

Hall stood and walked around the bridge. Everyone was busy, checking figures, running diagnostics on every system, tracking ship movements. He stood still in front of his seat, hands behind his back, staring out of the front view-screen. It felt good to be back in action.

At 1 hour until the jump, the UNSC Hydra was buzzing with life. Every hand knew that something big was happening. On the bridge, the pieces of the puzzle were slowly aligning. Intel had reported that the cruiser present in the group was indeed the UNSC Babylon, and that the three other destroyers now congregated around the RV point were the UNSC Firefly, UNSC Relentless, and the Hydra's sister-ship, the UNSC Chimera. Mallard was having a little more of a challenge trying to identify the corvettes and frigates, as their classes were more numerous than destroyers or cruiser.

The situation wasn't helped by the fact that the Antoinette had issued orders for a full communication lockdown, no signals to be broadcast at all by any ship. However, just from sensor and visual readings, they knew that at least five heavy frigates had joined the group, as well as up to eight corvettes. They had also managed to find some names that meant little to Hall, UNSC Phoenix, UNSC Riptide, etc. The fleet formed was formidable to say the least. Also manoeuvring its way through the ranks of frigates, destroyers and corvettes was the lumbering hospital ship UNSC Nightingale, legendary for having defied a retreat order to evacuate more wounded soldiers from Reach when it fell.

Hall left the situation in the control of Athena and the other bridge crew and headed for the mess. He always liked talking to the men under his command, it was a rather sentimental practice, he knew, but he felt that if he was to ask them to potentially lay down their lives at his command, he should at least treat them better than some of his contemporaries.

He entered the large room silently, slipping into the line of crew members waiting to be served from the canteen. No one noticed his presence as he winked at the server when she piled his food onto the tray. He quickly walked over to a table occupied by some junior officers, and cleared his throat quietly. "Mind if I join you, gentlemen?"

The man closest to him looked up as if he was about to tell him to jog on, but upon realising who he was, he stood up quickly, saluting "Not at all, Captain Hall sir" The other men around the table jumped

to attention.

Hall nodded "As you were" He sat down as they did, and smiled wryly at the now silent group. "Don't look so anxious, I don't bite" He began eating

The group relaxed a bit, obviously unaccustomed to having such a senior officer dine with them. A thin-faced Ensign spoke up "Sir, is it true that you turned down an offer to join the Spartan programme?"

Hall laughed, dabbing at his mouth with a tissue. "Good lord no, son, and if I had been offered, we wouldn't be having this conversation"

He spent the rest of the time in the mess talking animatedly with the men, listening to their stories as well as telling a few of his own. At 20 minutes till jump, he politely excused himself and headed back towards the bridge. On his way out, he grabbed a cup of tea from the machine, sipping it appreciatively.

As he keyed in his access code to the bridge, all the crew on deck snapped to attention. "Captain on deck!" someone shouted, and everyone saluted. Hall returned the salute with one hand, clutching his tea in the other.

"At ease, people, let's give me a full report ASAP, we're 20 minutes out." Hall said, striding towards the captain's seat, resting his beverage on the side. Data scrolled across his screen, showing that the engines were operating at maximum efficiency, and that the reactor was 100% functional.

"All systems at optimum, captain, awaiting instructions from Vice Admiral Yao, sir." Piped up Athena, materialising next to the main viewscreen, her toga even tidier than before. "Lieutenant Mallard and I have located and identified the entire of Battle-Group Zulu. Short version: The Babylon is the lone cruiser, then it's us and the three other destroyers, five heavy frigates, seven corvette class vessels and of course, the gentle giant, the Nightingale, whose Navigational AI needs to learn some manners." The specifications of the Battle-Group were scrolling up the main viewscreen. It was an impressive force for a covert mission, and Hall felt a twinge of nervousness rising inside him. This big a force could only mean high stakes and high danger. He cricked his neck, burying his misgivings, and keyed the ship-wide broadcast system from his console.

"All hands, this is Captain Hall. As I'm sure you're aware, we are currently awaiting commands to jump to an unknown location, and judging from the size of the task force, it unlikely that there will be a warm reception when we get there. All hands at Combat Alert Bravo until otherwise instructed. Be out." He ended the transmission, looking around at his bridge crew, serious-faced.

At 5 minutes till jump, the bridge was still alive with activity. People were beginning to panic at the lack of instructions. Then Mallard turned to face him. "Sir, orders from the Antoinette, jump co-ordinates and group formation position. Transferring to Navigation now sir."

Field took up the co-ordinates and, with the help of Athena and

Winters, the _Hydra_ was in position and ready to jump exactly one minute before the deadline. Athena's calm tones took up the final countdown, as the destroyer's Slip-Space drive prepared to punch a hole through the fabric of space and time. The deck began to vibrate, and as the deadline ticked over, they vanished from the Sol system with a flash of brilliant light, along with hundreds of thousands of tonnes of other warships.

****Jacob****

The four Spartans strode swiftly into the clearing by their Pelican dropship, covered in fluorescent blood and chalky dust. The mid-day sun blazed overhead, reflecting off of one of the planet's moons, low in the sky. Sabina-211 keyed the code for the rear door of the ship, and the ramp slowly opened. They marched into the bay of the craft, Josef, Rachel and Sabina sat on the rows of seats on either side of the bay, while Jacob entered the cockpit. He immediately turned on the communications systems in the ship and turned back into the bay, activating the holographic projectors in the space. The information from Vice Admiral Yao appeared, outlining the size and disposition of the UNSC Task-Force which was due to arrive in the Sigmus system in 18 hours.

Sabina whistled, impressed. "A Marathon-class, she's really pulling out all the stops." Rachel nodded slowly, impressed. Josef just stared at the schematics of the ships of Battle-Group Zulu, and Jake imagined that his jaw was open slightly. He realised that this was probably the most ships that the younger Spartans had ever seen in one place. That said a lot about how the war had fared for humanity. This force was a fraction of the size of the one that had valiantly tried to defend Reach, and failed.

Suddenly, the image in front of them was replaced by an incoming video message alert. Jacob was confused, normally communications took hours to travel through slip-space, how could a video comm be possible? Dubious, Jacob accepted the call with a few eye motions. A holographic projection of Vice Admiral Yao's head and shoulders appeared in the bay.

"Hello Spartans, we've had Forerunner additions made to our comms system, completely revolutionary. Instant slip-space comms. Marvellous." She turned in the projection, answering someone's question from behind her, before turning back. "Anyway, good job Spartans. The Battle-Group that I'm currently leading through slip-space is destined for Sigmus IV. Our primary objective is to deny the covenant forces there access to Forerunner technology beneath the surface. Once we jump in-system, we anticipate that a portion of the covenant group will counter us. Their ship-board plasma weaponry is not as effective in atmosphere, so they'll try to meet us exo-planet. However, any triple-A gun emplacements will be able to wreak havoc before we put them down, so I'm tasking you with neutralising any and all anti-ship guns before we arrive in just over 18 hours. You should also continue to monitor covenant activity in and around the crater." She paused, breathing heavily. "Unfortunately we can't hack into their communications, but we'll have to make do with just blasting them from the sky."

Jacob cleared his throat, removing his helmet. "Actually ma'am, we're already on that." He held up the captured Sanghelli helmet. "With a little persuasion, we should be able to monitor their chatter, and

stream it to the Battle group when they arrive."

She smiled genuinely "Excellent, then you should also gather data as to what exactly the covenant thinks is underneath them, and their progress. The monitoring should also give us the tactical edge during battle." She nodded happily. "Fantastic job so far Spartans, but the battle for Sigmus IV truly begins in 18 hours, Vice Admiral Yao out" Her visage faded away,

Jacob tossed the alien helmet to Sabina, who immediately began dismantling it with a series of precision tools seemingly pulled from thin air. He turned to the other two Spartans, smiling tightly. "Petty Officers, I'm going to run down to the river and collect water to fill up the ATV's fuel tanks, I think we might need them. While I'm gone, I want you two to use the SENTINEL satellite imaging to identify every major triple-A gun emplacement in this crater. I imagine that they would be settled along the rim, just like us." He put on his helmet.

Josef and Rachel nodded, standing to attention, before moving into the cockpit, sliding the door shut behind them. Sabina looked up from her work "I'll get the encryptions from this thing in no time, J, I'll buzz you when it's done."

He nodded, pausing in the doorway to the bay. "Sab, why is Yao putting half the Navy's functional ships into this? Does she know something we don't about the technology hidden here?"

Sab snorted "Of course she does, she's a spook, but it's our job to catch up to her, as far as I'm concerned." She back down at the comms unit in her hands, fiddling delicately with it.

Jake stared at the wall for a second, before moving out of the Pelican and out into the clearing. He knelt by the supply crates and retrieved a 500ml bottle of water, then moved over to the first of their two M274 Ultra-Light-All-Terrain-Vehicles. He popped the filler cap, before emptying the bottle into the fuel cell, plenty enough to get him to the river. He also attached a few large water containers to the vehicle, finally starting the engine with a throaty rumble. He accelerated smoothly away from the camp, heading downhill quickly, winding his way through the tall trunks and feeling all the rocks and ridges through the Mongoose's minimal suspension.

He broke through the thin trees, entering a shallow valley covered in high grasses, carving a path through the thick plant life. After all, in about 17 hours, stealth tactics were going to be a tad ineffective. He pulled up alongside the winding river, quickly filling the canisters with river water. Both the M12 Warthog and the M274 Mongoose could run off of impure water, thankfully. As he stood up from attaching the now full containers to the quad, he looked over the silent landscape.

His radio buzzed once, Sabina had finished. He mounted the small quad bike, starting the engine and making his way back towards camp, slowly winding up the hill, spraying dirt and leaf litter behind him. He pulled up behind the Pelican and dismounted, heading into the bay.

"We've got ears?" He asked Sabina as she held out the datapad, lines of covenant text flashing over the screen.

"Every encrypted communication is ours, I've tasked the dumb AI in the dropship to start cataloguing any data and screening it, anything concerning forerunners gets highlighted, as well as more urgent comms." She paused as file icons began sorting themselves on the screen into an intuitive folder system. "We also now have the ability to broadcast interference signals on their frequencies and in their own encryptions, leaving them blind."

"Good, what about the triple-A defences?"

"I'll let them brief you." Sabina said, banging on the cockpit door with one gauntleted fist. The other two Spartans quickly piled out of the room, Josef clutched his own datapad in one hand.

"Sir, we've located and identified ten type-38 Tyrant anti-air defences arranged along the crater's rim. Their combined arcs of fire and not inconsiderable power would wreak havoc to the Battle-Group when it arrives." Josef called up the tactical map of the surface, overlaying bright red dots where each gun was located. "The UNSC database on the type-38 reveals a major weakness, the power cell at its core is easily destabilised, which can be achieved with nothing more than a couple of well-placed blocks of C-12." A schematic view of the enormous alien stationary gun appeared in the bay, rotating slowly, highlighting the white-hot power cell at its heart.

Jake nodded, he'd dealt with similar weapons in the battle for Charybdis IX, they put on a good fireworks display when they overloaded. "How do you suggest we perform neutralisation?"

Rachel took over, stepping forward into the holographic projection. "Hit-and-run, sir. We use the Mongooses to approach the guns, put down any resistance swiftly, blow the gun, and move on double-time. We can use our suits to broadcast a jamming signal, keep them guessing for as long as possible" She shrugged, a notoriously difficult gesture to perform in full MJOLNIR. "It's a matter of time, sir. This is the only way we could think to neutralise every weapon within our timeframe of 17 hours. Which may not even be accurate, we all know how temperamental slip-space travel can be."

Sabina nodded from her seat. It was very difficult to know what a fully-suited Spartan was thinking, but Jacob had learned to pick up on the minute details, and the way she held herself told him that she was excited. He had yet to learn those ticks in his new comrades, but Josef's leg was jerking slightly, betraying his anticipation.

"Agreed Petty Officer, we don't have the luxury of time, so we need to hit fast and hard. Let's lock and load and get these guns offline. Close-to-mid-ranged combat, gear up." He waved the hologram away and marched out of the ship, his boots clanging loudly on the metal. The others followed him, a cacophony of metal on metal.

They gathered around the weapons crates, selecting their tools of destruction for the day. Jacob took hold of an MA5D assault rifle and an M7 sub-machine gun, sliding their bolts back and snapping fresh magazines into the chambers. Sabina inserted shells into her M90 Combat Shotgun, deftly pumping the first shell into the chamber before slipping it onto the magnetic holder on her back. She removed

a long box from the crate, opening it and gasping quietly. From it, she pulled a menacing-looking gun, with a round magazine protruding from the receiver. The shining silver and orange paintwork glinted in the sunlight. She checked the magazine of the M279 SAW before retracting the bolt, cycling the first 7.62mm round into the chamber.

"I thought these were still in testing?" She asked rhetorically, raising the long-barrelled machine gun to her shoulder and aiming down the sights.

"I thought you'd like it" Jake smiled inside his helmet

Rachel whistled "That's a big gun". Her own inventory consisted of an M7 and a BR85HB Battle rifle, fixed securely to her back.

"We got to test a few prototypes on Onyx, the fire rate is higher than anything else we have" Josef noted, an edge of awe creeping into his voice. "We're going to need the suppressive power soon enough" He walked over to the waiting Mongoose, his own BR85 locked onto his back, accompanied by the legendarily powerful and accurate M6D.

Josef saddled up on the quad, gunning the engine into life. Jake grabbed a satchel full of C-12 High Explosive charges, before mounting the other ATV, revving the motor. A real-time map of the surface manifested itself on his HUD as Sabina perched on the Mongoose's rear passenger seat, grabbing onto his shoulder with one hand, poking the muzzle of her SAW over his other shoulder. Rachel did the same for the other vehicle, hanging off of the back of the small four-wheeler.

Jake brought up the TEAMCOM channel on his HUD, linking the team's helmet systems together. "Josef, lead the way, the first gun is two clicks, move out."

Josef gunned the throttle, shooting off along the ridgeway, his speed hampered slightly by the weight of two sets of MJOLNIR. Jake followed, dodging in between the trees and boulders. If they lost control, as the M274s were prone to do at speed, they would either tumble down a rocky slope on one side, or down a thickly forested hill on the other. They drove along a knife edge, the hulking forms of the assorted covenant fleet glistening in the distance.

As they neared the first gun, the guttural tones of Sanghelli radio chatter started up, and ONI's most advanced translation software translated into English in the form of a text log on the lower right hand side of their HUDs. Normal checking-in to their commanders. Jake activated the jamming signal after the check-in transmission, cutting off the gun crew from the rest of the fleet.

The two ATVs broke through onto rocky ground, and the 50 metre-high tyrant-class gun loomed into view, 40 metre long barrel rising steeply from the ground. Its plasma glowed a dull blue, snaking lazily inside the conduits running along the barrel. Jacob accelerated along with the other quad, and they covered the distance between them and the small plateau on which the gun rested in seconds.

As they roared over the lip of the plateau, Jake spotted a few

armoured Sanghelli standing up outside the gun's doorway, looking in their direction, hands reaching for their belts. As they closed the gap, his helmet audio filters maxed out as Sabina opened fire with the SAW, sending dozens of bullets towards the guards, their shields rippling as they scrambled to get inside the gun's lower deck. As they did, Rachel opened up as well, three-round burst fire ripping through one Elite's helmet, dropping him instantly in a spray of purple blood.

Gravel flew as both Mongoose's skidded to a halt, and the Spartans jumped off and ran towards the doorway, firing their weapons at the retreating aliens. Sabina motioned for Josef and Rachel to move around to the other doorway, on the other side of the circular deck. They did so quickly, exchanging shots with the hostiles inside, plasma hissing through the air, drowned out only by the staccato firing of Rachel's SMG and the heavy fire from Josef's Pistol. Jacob and Sabina flung themselves against the curved walls either side of the door, firing blindly into the structure. Motion tracker showed four targets still inside, and Jake set up a short countdown over the TEAMCOM, which displayed the countdown on everyone's HUDs simultaneously. As the 5 seconds crawled by, Jake saw Sabina prepare a stun grenade and toss it through the doorway. The flash of her arm attracted fresh plasma fire from within, but her lightning-quick reflexes saved her from harm. At the 2 second mark, the deafening twin bangs of the two stun grenades, (one from the other side of the room) resounded throughout the small room, accompanied by shouts of pain from the cornered Elites.

As the timer swept past zero, Jake pushed away from the wall and rounded the corner just ahead of Sabina, his Assault rifle raised. He identified his targets, the four blinded Elites scrambling around on the floor, one firing wildly in their general direction with his rifle, melting the purple metal around the doorway. He took aim, still moving quickly into the room, and squeezed the match-grade trigger, peppering the enemy combatant with lead, depleting the alien shields and ripping through the body armour, causing the Elite to convulse, his rifle falling to the ground. The alien took his last breath and lay still. The other disoriented hostiles were quickly cut down by the combined fire of the three Spartans, and soon the floor was slick with purple.

Confirming that no enemy was left standing, the others quickly left the gun, returning to the vehicles. Jake strode over to the transparent viewscreen looking into the gun's core, and stuck one block of C-12 onto the surface, turning on the remote detonator before retreating to the safety of the Mongoose, slipping onto the rear of Sabina's ride, tapping her helmet. They shot away, and as he looked back, he clenched his fist, activating the charge.

The horizon behind them turned brilliant white, and the immense shockwave almost toppled the four Spartans from their quads. The plasma core had exploded just as predicted, carving a large chunk of land out of the hillside.

The two quads pulled alongside each other, and Josef gave a thumbs up, too shocked to speak.

Jake grinned behind the faceplate. One down, nine to go.

5. Chapter 5: Sabotage

The Mongoose wasn't going to last much longer, Jacob thought, feeling the rough vibrations through the frame of the small quad bike, already laden with two fully-suited Spartans. He glanced to their right and saw the other Spartans atop their machine, speeding through the thin forest at breakneck speed.

The smouldering ruins of the ninth type-38 anti-aircraft gun fell quickly behind them. The two blocks of C-12 had done their job well. He reloaded his M7 Sub Machine Gun, slamming a fresh magazine home with one hand. He and Sabina-211 on their mount, and Josef-G167 and Rachel-G023 on theirs, had spent the last 10 hours working their way around the rim of the enormous crater in which a covenant fleet had berthed. Their objective, to neutralise the ten Tyrant-class triple-A emplacements scattered around the crater.

So far, only the last emplacement had put up serious resistance. Their jamming signal broadcast from each of the Spartans' armour systems had confused the Covenant commanders for a long time, but eventually they realised that the mysterious explosions occurring all around the nestled fleet were all targeted at the battle-group's only serious surface-to-ship defence. The ninth gun had been reinforced, and it had taken the four of them 20 minutes to eliminate the determined resistance. Jake checked his suit's diagnostic. He had taken a lot of plasma fire from a stationary gun, and his shield generator was critically damaged. He looked over the status of the others.

Sabina's suit was flashing a dozen warning lights, the fusion cell had been damaged and her Bio readings showed that she had minor burns over her lower back and thigh. She had borne the brunt of a plasma explosion, she was obviously more injured than she let on. Josef was suffering from a torn shoulder muscle and a minor fracture to the left ulna. Rachel had fared slightly better, the only obvious sign of injury being a slight limp, which correlated to the torn ligament in her knee being shown on the HUD.

He closed the window and shook his head slightly. They needed to get this done and get to a medical crew, and unfortunately for them the last gun was likely to be the best defended. And then there was their ride. The bike had been strafed by low-flying covenant Banshee fighters, and the engine was beginning to make abrasive grinding noises. He had a strong suspicion that when the engine stopped, it wouldn't start again. Heavy covenant radio chatter started up, and Jake activated the jamming signal as they approached their final target. He checked his chronometer, they had three hours until the massive Battle-Group of UNSC warships arrived to perform "asset denial", which was spook-speak for shooting at anything that moved until it didn't, then scavenging what they could.

As they sprung over the crest of a hill into a shallow dip in the ridgeline. Below them sat the now familiar silhouette of the emplacement. As they sped down the slope, Jake spotted numerous Sanghelli and Unggoy in defensive positions behind hastily erected barricades. He grabbed his MA5D from his back and aimed roughly towards the position, grabbing Sabina's shoulder tightly with his free hand to steady himself. He heard Josef firing rapid three round bursts from his BR85HB from beside them.

The waiting enemies scattered slightly under the hail of bullets, but many of them opened fire with their own weapons. Plasma fire and crystalline needle like projectiles filled the air, scorching the hillside around their vehicles. Rachel twisted the handlebars around, speeding around the barricades, allowing Josef to fire into the exposed flank of the defensive formation. As Sabina manoeuvred down the gradient, Jake saw a lone Unggoy, apart from the rest of the group, raise a hefty barrelled weapon onto its tiny shoulders. The Type-33 Fuel Rod Canon spat out a bright green energy projectile in their direction. Sabina spotted it and tried to avoid the round, but the round curved down towards the ground in front of them, hit the earth and detonated, throwing the two Spartans through the air. Jake tumbled head over heel, shields flitting out as he hit the rough ground heavily, spotting Sabina's crumpled form a few feet away. He felt pain shoot up his spine, and his HUD warned him of his freshly fractured Scapula.

He struggled to his hands and knees, suddenly aware of the plasma fire streaking just over his head. He grabbed Sabina by the arm and dragged her behind a large boulder on the hillside. His ears stopped ringing slowly, and he tasted metal. He checked her vitals, breathing a sigh of relief at the steady pulse and respiratory rate. Everything else was a luxury at times like these.

Jake grabbed the SAW from her back, checking the ammo counter before hauling himself to his feet, fresh stabs of agony arising from his pelvis. He spotted an advancing group of Grunts, and opened up, the high rate of fire and forceful recoil of the beast in his arms catching him off guard for the first few bursts, but he quickly grew accustomed to the massive gun. The Grunts squeaked and screamed as his bullets cut through their ranks. As the last one fell, he ducked behind the boulder, swapping magazines, fumbling slightly. Shock was beginning to set in. He knew he needed to get out of danger quickly before he became combat ineffective.

As he rounded the rock once more, he spotted Rachel and Josef slicing their way through the alien formations, Josef expertly dispatching enemies left right and centre with his powerful Magnum pistol, Rachel decimating the Elite warriors with devastating fire from her SMG. They moved fluidly, ducking swinging limbs and plasma bolts, pirouetting smoothly round falling aliens.

Jake pulled the trigger, suppressing the remaining hostiles just outside the gun's door, depleting Sanghelli shields quickly, perforating the warriors' forms with holes. Josef and Rachel ran towards the boulder, and Jake covered their retreat, tossing a Frag Grenade over their heads. As they hurdled over the rock, the grenade exploded with a dull thwump, throwing a spout of dirt and gravel into the air. When the dust settled, Jake opened his eyes, ignoring the growing blind spots in the corners of his vision.

Rachel slumped down next to him, her helmet scorched and dented. "All hostiles down, proceeding to primary objective" She gasped, coughing loudly. Josef crouched next to them, depolarising his visor.

"You're in no shape to go anywhere, Rache, Sabina is out cold and the CPO is in a rough way." He stated, his voice flat and measured, fighting the panic he must feel rising in his chest.

Jake struggled to his feet, suppressing the jolts of pain the motion

caused. "I'll manage, Petty Officer, what's the situation on the vehicles?" He shouldered the SAW, wincing.

Josef shook his head "Ours got gutted by rifle fire, and yoursâ€|" He gestured to the warped and twisted mass of metal a few metres away.

Jacob grunted "So that's a negative, can you get Rachel and Sabina further away? We still need to blow the gun." He reached around to grab the last blocks of C-12 from his satchel.

Josef nodded, before leaning down and helping Rachel to her feet, and only now could Jacob see the extent of her damage. Her entire suit of armour was scorched with plasma fire, pitted and cratered, leaking fluid from the left knee joint. Together they lifted the limp Spartan between them, staggering away from the emplacement.

Jake sighed, and turned towards the looming figure of the Tyrant. He limped quickly towards the doorway, covering all the angles with the bulbous-magazined weapon. As he entered the deck, he heard the single whine of a covenant impulse drive approaching, he poked his head outside and spotted the Sanghelli dismounting from the Ghost-class scout vehicle. The split jaws opened in anger at the scene of devastation in front of him. He dashed towards the doorway, not spotting the Spartan within. As he ran into the room, Jake stepped behind him and grabbed his long skull, twisting it around sharply, snapping the beasts' neck with a sickening crunch.

Jake radioed Josef, leaning against the wall, breathing heavily. "Josef, I've got a Ghost without a rider here, you've got to get back to the dropship, fly over here and get us. If you hurry, we might all make it" He paused, letting his words sink in.

A second later, Josef's voice came back over the comms. "Affirmative"

Jake turned to the vulnerable core of the gun, stumbling over and affixing the last blocks of C-12 to the thin protective cover, setting the timer to 3 minutes. As he left the room, he met Josef coming in the other direction, strolling towards the Ghost.

"Go, clock's ticking" Jake said, nodding back towards the emplacement.

Josef hesitated, then made the signature 'smiling face' gesture over his faceplate, the first time he had done so to the older Spartan.

Jake reciprocated, then clapped the young Spartan on the shoulder before striding 100 metres down the slope towards the small cave in which the others had hidden. He heard the low moaning of the Ghost speed off into the distance, and ducked into the cave, eyes immediately adjusting to the darkness.

Sabina sat slumped against the rough stone walls, head leaned back. Rachel sat opposite her, looking at him as he entered.

"She's stable" The younger woman whispered, coughing

Jake nodded, before retrieving his MediKit from his belt, extracting

a small hypodermic syringe from within it. He checked the contents, before inserting the tip into a small port on her neck, depressing the plunger slowly before tossing the used sharp deeper into the cave. Adrenaline was a hell of a kickstart.

Seconds later, Sabina jerked upwards, scrambling around wildly, breathing rapidly. Jacob grabbed her shoulders and settled her down. "Hey, welcome back, we're waiting for extraction, you got knocked out when the ATV got hit, and the last gun is about to blow anyâ€|"

A massive explosion thundered above them, the shockwave shuddering through the cave, dust trickled down from the ceiling as the sky outside lit up.

Sabina rested her head against the wall. She may be alive, but her left calf muscle was torn, she had 2nd degree burns on most of her left arm, and a fractured clavicle. Jake realised suddenly that of the three of them, he was in the best shape. He grabbed Sabina's M90 Combat Shotgun, sat himself just inside the cave entrance, and faced out, weapon pressed up against his shoulder, waiting.

Twenty tense minutes later, they heard the blessed sound of Pelican engines settling on the plain below. Jake turned around, nodded and stood in the cramped space. He helped the two injured soldiers to their feet, following them out into the afternoon sunlight. The bulky form of the dropship perched on the slope below, and Josef jumped down from the back ramp, running up the hill to help. Together, he and Jake got the two into the bay and strapped them in.

Jake slumped into the pilot's chair, closing the ramp and gunning the engines, lifting off smoothly and speeding back towards their camp. Josef sat down heavily next to him, taking off his helmet, groaning.

"Sir, we need to contact the Battle-Group, they need to prepare a medical bay ASAP" He mumbled as Jake gave control to the navigation AI.

"I know, arrival of the Battle-Group is 1 hour, can we hold out until then?" Jake muttered

Josef looked straight ahead, glassy-eyed. "I guess we'll have to, do we have enough bio-foam?"

Jake chuckled, immediately gasping in pain at the movement. He stared at the screens in front of him, marvelling in the fact that all of them were alive, at least for now.

****Hall****

Captain Hall looked into the black void of Slip-Space, hands held behind his back, whistling softly. The Hydra had been travelling through the folds of the Universe for 10 hours, Athena and Lieutenant Fields were constantly re-checking the slip-space calculations, every time they conferred for a few minutes, the time until re-entry into normal space became less. Athena had tried to explain the discrepancies, but soon she ran out of English terminology to describe the quantum phenomena. In short, because of the large mass of the entire Battle-Group, the predicted Slip-time was variable.

Snapping himself back to the present, he addressed the empty bridge "Athena, sitrep?"

Athena's small holographic avatar appeared in front of him, holographic tablet held under her arm. "Exactly the same as it was when you asked an hour ago captain, when I advised you to take a sleep cycle when you could, with the rest of the bridge crew" She raised one eyebrow "I can fly this crate without any organic help, sir"

Hall chuckled, massaging his eyes "I know, Athena, but regulation dictates that at least one Commissioned Officer must be on the bridge at any time." He looked out of the viewscreen, just making out the shadowy silhouettes of the other vessels in the formation.

"Captain, message from the Antoinette, details about the deployment." She closed her eyes briefly, and the scrolls of alphanumeric symbols winding around her toga clad form moved faster. She opened her orange-tinted eyes, smiling wryly "Oh, very interesting. Have you ever been to the Sigmus system Captain?"

He shook his head "Shouldn't you already know my file? Or are 4th gen AIs not as smart as I think?" He smirked, knowing how much his question would irk her.

"Very funny, sir. You know very well that I was engaging in what I've been told is called 'small talk'." She shifted her robe slightly.

"You were doing very well until I train wrecked you." He smiled "Alright then, spill the beans, what's the mission?"

She nodded and tapped a few times on her tablet, bringing up the relevant documents and schematics of Sigmus IV. "Simply put, Captain, we're here as the escalation of an existing mission to determine the intent and progress of a Covenant Separatist fleet that landed on the surface a month ago."

Hall frowned "Strength?"

"From the recon team on the ground and their SENTINEL imagery, one CCS-class battle cruiser, three light cruisers, four destroyers and assorted tag alongs." Information on every one of the ships scrolled past the viewscreen.

He raised an eyebrow "That's a lot of firepower. Even with the Babylon's arsenal, I don't like these odds." He sat down in his seat, reading the documents.

Athena fluttered out of existence from the main viewscreen and reappeared on the arm of his chair. "Captain, in an open conflict, our odds of success aren't terribly high, but I suspect that the Covenant battle cruiser will stay on the planet's surface, they're digging for something. With their hands tied elsewhere, and the considerable advantage of surprise being on our side, our chances improve significantly. I have run over three hundred thousand simulations." She looked up at him, and revelation flooded through the Captain. He suddenly realised that she cared about the safety of the ship and her crew just as much as he did. It wasn't about

programming, each 4th generation smart AI was based off of a donor's cortex. She was fundamentally human.

He nodded, turning his eyes back to the intelligence files in front of him. "This reconnaissance team? How long have they been there? This intel is extremely thorough." He scanned the documentation for some sort of signature or watermark, finding none.

The small figure of the Greek goddess hesitated as if rechecking her database, before answering "According to Vice Admiral Yao's reports, they've been on surface for less than three days. Extraordinary."

"Three days? Incredible" Hall muttered, impressed. He perused the satellite imagery and long-range aerial images for a while, before closing the files and checking the engines' status. "Athena, wake up the bridge staff, we're one hour from normal space. Set us to combat alert Alpha."

She bowed slightly "Aye, sir." Her voice suddenly boomed from the ship's Public Address system as alarms and klaxons blared up all over the Hydra. "All, hands, Combat alert Alpha, all crew report to battlestations. This is not a drill, I repeat this is not a drill." She lowered her voice to normal, rolling her holographic eyes "As if anyone thinks that this is all a drill. Honestly, it's a tad cliché"

Hall chuckled "Run a full diagnostic on all systems before the others get here, I want to be absolutely ready for whatever they throw at us." He stood again, looking at deck cameras at the hundreds of men and women sprinting to their stations, the hallways of the destroyer suddenly bustling with life.

"Strange, how calm and surreal slip-space is, considering how violent a process it is." He muttered to the AI. "Rather like a calm before a storm. I have a funny feeling that we're heading straight into a hurricane"

The rest of the bridge crew trickled in over the next few minutes, saluting the Captain as they did. Several of them were still blinking sleep from their eyes and yawning as they took their posts, slipping miniscule earpieces into their ears. Hall briefed them all, outlining the mission directives and challenges.

"One last thing, I've received word from Admiral Yao that her recon team on the ground have tapped into the Covenant Battle Net. Obviously this gives us a huge advantage, and the surprise nature of this incursion should help our position also." He paused, letting his words sink in. "But do not become complacent. This battle will be a hard-fought one, and a bloody one at that. Do your duty, hold your ground, and we can all of us go home." He looked around the bridge, seeing determination and strength in all the crew's faces. "Lieutenant Fields, ETA?"

"30 minutes sir, we'll enter normal space above the surface of Sigmus IV's second satellite" She reported, tying her hair into a tight bun as she did.

Lieutenant Mallard turned to face him "Sir, the Antoinette is requesting targeting networking solutions ASAP"

Hall nodded at Winters, who got to work, linking the targeting systems for the ship's weapons to the Fire Control Centre aboard the stealth prowler. Green lights lit up across the console to indicate a successful connection.

Hall stood at the main viewcreen, tapping his boot against the floor restlessly. "Alright people, let's get ready to come out swinging."

****Jacob****

The first squirt of the biofoam caused his skin to burn and tingle. The second numbed his upper back, and the third caused a sigh of relief as the powerful painkiller in the mixture worked on his damaged shoulder blade. Sabina-211 loomed over him as he sat on a crate outside the Pelican, holding the half-empty canister of the painkiller/antiseptic/coagulant like a weapon, the thin nozzle of the can pressed into the port over his left shoulder, allowing the foam to permeate into the MJOLNIR armour, coalescing into a thin layer over most of his shoulder and back.

"Better?" She asked, withdrawing the nozzle, standing back.

He nodded appreciatively, before standing, wincing at the stab of pain from his pelvis. No amount of bio-foam could heal that. He took off his helmet and clipped it to his belt, cricking his neck to both sides. "Fantastic" He said, an edge of sarcasm creeping into his voice. He reached out and took the canister, pointing down on to the crate "Now it's your turn"

She sat, holding out her left forearm. Her plating on the underside of the arm was sooty and blackened, plasma damage. 2nd degree burns lay underneath the ceramic-alloy combat skin, and Jake wasted no time in injecting the medical froth into her armour, coating her skin. She made no sound, but the slight jolt in her left leg gave away the discomfort she felt. Jake removed the nozzle from her arm and reinserted it into her shoulder port, covering the area around her fractured collarbone with the anaesthetic.

As he finished, the pressurised container spluttered and emptied. He threw it into a crate nearby, offering his Spartan-II comrade his hand. She grabbed it and he pulled her to her feet, the pair of them suppressing bursts of pain from their battered forms.

Josef limped over from inside the dropship, waving another empty container. "I used it all on her. Her burns should heal pretty quickly, but her armour's kaput." He fiddled with his own armour, rolling the shoulders. "Radio's hot, Covenant have been going crazy since our little run-and-gun op. There have been a lot of promises of death and sanctified slaughter, etcetera."

"Good work, Spartan, get the weapons and equipment into the dropship. Leave the rest." He moved quickly out of the evening sunlight and into the shade of the bay, approaching Rachel, who was sitting near to the cockpit, staring straight ahead to the opposite wall. He checked her status on his HUD. Minor contusions all over, nothing unexpected, large areas of her torso had sustained minor burns, now being treated by the copious amounts of bio-foam in her armour, and her right knee was dislocated. Her suit's diagnostics showed low

levels of hydraulic fluid, high levels of damage to all armour plating and significant trauma to the gel layers. At least her fusion cell and shield generator were fully functional.

"The Battle-Group arrives soon, we're going to RV with them and get us all checked over." He said calmly, crouching down in front of her to look her in the eyes. She looked back, eyes sharp and focused.

"Understood sir" She said, sitting up straighter in her chair, strapping herself in securely. Sabina sat down next to her, doing likewise.

Jake stood and helped Josef and Sabina bring in the last of the weapons, stacking two M41 Jackhammer Rocket Launchers, still in their boxes, on to one of the seats.

"Shame we didn't get to use these" Josef remarked, stowing the last box under a seat.

"I have a feeling we'll be back soon enough" Jacob muttered, sitting in the pilot's seat and grabbing the control stick. The door seals hissed as he locked them, raising the ramp and closing it. He throttled up, lifting smoothly off the ground, the downdraught bending young trees away from the craft and kicking up a cloud of leaf litter and dirt.

As they shot away from the ground, multiple aerial contacts appeared on their six. Jake pulled the controls left, and the dropship banked sharply, descending to tree-top level as the two Banshee aircraft closed the gap, wing pods glowing brightly as they boosted.

Josef grabbed onto the doorway, looking at the radar contacts. "I've got an idea." As he spoke, the lead flier strafed at the Pelican with twin plasma canons. Jake jerked the controls around, evading the bulk of the plasma, but a few shots found their mark, melting away at the ship's hull.

Jake pulled them back into a steep roll, and G-forces tugged at their heavy suits. He dropped in behind the covenant aircraft, firing at the rear target with the chin-mounted 30mm canon, peppering it with depleted uranium slug rounds. The sleek craft twitched in the sky as it was shredded, bits of purple metal flying back and striking the Pelican's airframe, before falling from the sky, trailing black smoke. As the automatic canon swivelled around on its axis to target the next Banshee, a loud crunching noise came from the nose of the dropship, and Jacob swore loudly.

"Gun's jammed" He grunted, throttling up as the remaining Banshee soared high into the air, performing the exact same move that he had done moments previously. Plasma bolts strafed them, turning the metal white-hot.

"Keep her steady" Josef said, before marching purposefully into the bay, ripping open a crate and hefting out an M41 Jackhammer shoulder-launched rocket launcher. Jake ducked and weaved, sticking close to the treeline, mirroring the natural topography, the Banshee still close behind them, trying to lock on to their thermal signature. Jake answered the lock-on alarm by deploying counter measures, shooting flares out of each side of the ship.

Josef walked over to the ramp door, activating the mechanism. He crouched by the opening door, resting the twin-tubed rocket launcher on his shoulder, taking careful aim at the incoming fighter. The pilot of the Banshee evidently saw him take aim, because he tried to bank away from the rear of the Pelican. He wasn't quick enough. With a smile, Josef acquired target lock, and pulled the trigger, sending the 102mm High Explosive rocket in a winding trajectory towards the Banshee, slamming into the aircraft's left wing before detonating, igniting the plasma fuel in a spectacular explosion. Josef lowered the launcher and closed the ramp. "Sky is clear, sir, take her up!" He shouted back to the cockpit.

Rachel coughed loudly, choking on the back-blast from the M41. "No, that's okay, I didn't need to breathe anyway." She choked.

Sabina depolarised her visor, nodding approvingly at Josef "Good work, now strap in, we're leaving this rock for the time begin."

He dumped the heavy launcher back into its crate before taking a seat and fastening his harness. The Pelican's nose tilted up, and soon they had escaped the atmosphere and were hurtling through space towards the RV point, just behind Sigmus IV's second moon.

"Hull integrity looks good, engines just under the red-line point, ETA 5 minutes" Came Jake's voice over the intercom. The older Spartan sat back and let the Nav AI do the rest of the work, and they were soon at their established waiting point. They swivelled round and counter-thrusted, bringing the small ship to a gradual halt, waiting for the fleet to arrive.

They waited there for a few minutes in silence, everyone too tired or injured to make conversation. Jake rechecked Admiral Yao's message, very aware of how vulnerable their unarmed troop transport was. Suddenly, radiation detectors sounded, and a spinning disc of light a couple of kilometres wide appeared, growing from a point directly ahead. Jake watched as Battle-Group Zulu materialised in front of him, and suddenly their radio was lighting up, a dozen different UNSC channels in full use. The UNSC Babylon led the group, its geometrically perfect hull soaring through space. In its wake were the sleek destroyers, and the entire group was surrounded by a force of Frigates and Corvettes, which were dwarfed by the size of the cruiser. There was no real sense of scale, but Jake knew that the Mako-class corvettes were 160 metres long, and were pinpricks at this distance.

The familiar silhouette of the Marie-Antoinette hovered above the group, directing the ships into their formation. As Jake patched the hull cameras through to the holographic projector in the bay, he received a hail from the Admiral. Her face appeared on the display in front of him.

"Chief Petty Officer" She greeted, smiling wryly "Do you think they'll spot us?"

"Ma'am, they won't have time to spot you." Jake replied "We've got wounded, ma'am, but all Tyrant-class guns are down."

"Excellent, and your Nav AI has just transferred the encryption codes to the Covenant Battle-Net, so we're all set to begin operations. As

for wounded, the UNSC _Nightingale_ is ready to receiveâ€¦" She shook her head slightly "Scratch that, too public. The UNSC _Hydra_'s med bay is more private, I'll meet you in the _Hydra_'s hangar, I have a specialist on station who is more than qualified to work with Spartans."

Jake nodded "Understood ma'am, who's the specialist?"

Yao looked straight into the camera, grimacing "Humanity's foremost expert on the Forerunners, Dr Catherine Halsey."

6. Chapter 6: Engagement

****Hall****

"Athena, status report?" barked Hall, looking out of the view-screen at the second moon of Sigmus IV.

Athena's avatar appeared by his side, straightening her robe "Captain, we've re-entered normal space with a deviation of less than one kilometre. Apparently the _Antoinette_'s advanced drives guided us through slip space."

Hall whistled "Hostiles?"

"Negative, sir, all enemy ships are ground side, and until we round the moon, they shouldn't know that we're here." She chuckled softly "unless of course they had any sort of radiation detectors, you should see the space around us through the alpha-filter, it's lit up like a Christmas tree."

Hall grunted, looking around at the busy bridge "Alright people, what's our combat effectiveness?"

"Sir, all weapons systems green, Vice Admiral Yao has fire control." Harrison reported

"Engines at 100% efficiency sir, slip-space drives re-optimising." Chorused Winters, sipping his coffee.

"Message from the Admiral, sir, your eyes only" called Mallard.

Hall strode over to his console, reading the brief yet powerful message.

Clear MedBay and the halls from there to the Hangar, myself and my recon team are coming aboard ASAP. Yao

Hall deleted the message, then rubbed his temples.

"Sir! The Vice Admiral has transferred control of the Battle-Group to Admiral Marden aboard the _Babylon_, but we're still under her command, sir." Said Mallard, looking confused.

"Sir, unidentified contact, closing fast on our hangar, automatic defences finding targeting solution" rattled Harrison, hands flying across the console.

"Belay that, Lieutenant, it's ONI business." Spoke Hall, standing up,

hands behind his back. "Athena, evacuate the medical bay, hangar and clear a route from one to the other. No one gets in to those sectors, understood?"

She nodded after a pause, tapping a stylus onto her holographic tablet. "Affirmative sir, will you be greeting our guests?"

"I will indeed." He turned to Mallard "Lieutenant, keep me up to date about the fleet's movements, synchronise to my datapad. You have the bridge, Lieutenant Winters. I'm going to find some answers to all of this." He checked for the synchronisation icon on his pad before leaving the bridge and heading towards the Hangar. Things were suddenly getting a lot more interesting.

****Jacob****

"That was a close one" Muttered Jacob-209, relief spreading across his face as the 50mm close-point defence guns on the hull of the Hydra retreated into their nacelles. He gently guided the battered Pelican dropship towards the single hangar bay aboard the London-class destroyer. The rest of the Battle-Group hung around them, frigates, corvettes, three other destroyers and the mammoth UNSC Babylon, a Marathon-class heavy cruiser.

The bulky Pelican lumbered through the transparent shield across the hangar's entrance, before gently coming to rest. Jake powered down the engines, spotting the only person in the space, a grey haired, tall man wearing the stripes of a Captain. He pushed himself up from his seat and walked into the crew bay, and saw that Josef-G167 had already disengaged his harness and was helping Rachel-G023 to her feet. They had all been injured in the destruction of key Covenant anti-air defences around their fleet mere hours ago. Sabina stood, walking with a slight limp towards the back of the bay, one arm held stiff at her side.

Jake keyed the ramp hydraulics and watched as the door slowly opened, revealing the Captain standing about 10 metres away from the back of the Pelican, datapad held under his arm. As the man recognised the towering figures as Spartan warriors, a brief look of awe flashed across his face.

Jacob stepped forward and saluted, hearing another ligament twang in his shoulder. "Chief Petty Officer Jacob-209, I was told to report to the med, bay, sir."

The Captain returned the salute, craning his neck to get a good view of the others. "Captain Hall, commander of the UNSC Hydra, at your service, Spartans." He took in Rachel's arm draped over Josef's shoulder, and the scorched and dented MJOLNIR armour that all of them wore. "Med bay's right this way, Athena will direct you, Vice Admiral Yao is right behind you."

As he spoke, the holographic face of a Greek Goddess materialised next to the door their left, waving once. Sabina placed Rachel's other arm over her own shoulder, and together, the three Spartans walked over to the door and disappeared from sight.

Jacob didn't move. "Sir, I'm waiting for Admiral Yao also." He looked down into the man's face. The Captain looked a little shocked, but he kept his composure.

"Affirmative." He said, looking up and down Jacob's towering form.

Jacob watched as another, matte-black Pelican entered the Hangar, the downdraught whipping at him as the craft settled smoothly down onto the other pad. The side exit opened, and Vice Admiral Yao stepped down, her black hair whipping in the wind. As the engines on the drop ship settled into silence, Yao walked over to the pair, prompting both of them to salute her. Jake concealed a gasp of pain as he did so, holding himself tall.

Yao saluted, nodding in greeting to the Spartan before turning to the Captain. "Captain Hall, my apologies for this, but as I'm sure you're now aware, my reconnaissance team is a little too secret to be seen walking around the Nightingale. Admiral Marden is barking into my ear about withholding such a valuable asset such as the Hydra from battle, but we'll be out of your hair soon enough."

Hall nodded "We are at your disposal ma'am, as well as your team's." He cleared his throat quietly before continuing "With your permission, ma'am, I'd like to return to the bridge, duty calls."

"Absolutely Captain, it'll be like we were never here. Because we were never here." She said, an edge of secrecy accompanying her words. "We have all we need in our shuttle and in the Med-Bay."

The Captain saluted, and, with a sideways glance at Jacob, he walked through the Hangar doors and out of sight. Jacob immediately turned to Yao, questions forming in his mouth. However, she had already turned back to the black dropship and was talking to someone over her earpiece. The ramp doors opened, and three crate-loaded dollies, pushed by technicians, skidded down the ramp, heading straight for the medical bay. None of the Techs even gave the Spartan as much as a glance as they passed, wheeling the trollies away.

As the muffled thunder of the wheels on the floor was cut off by the closing doors, two figures walked slowly down the walkway towards them. One was a serious-faced ONI Warrant-Officer, clutching an MA5C. The other, shorter person was a middle-aged woman with short grey hair, wearing a white laboratory coat over a blue shirt and a grey skirt. She held her hands in front of her, and it was only after a second look that Jake realised that her hands were bound in front of her.

Dr Catherine Halsey's face lit up momentarily as she spotted the Spartan, before settling into a blank expression. Jake jerked his arm, a signal of his intense discomfort at seeing the creator and director of the Spartan-II project marched like a petty criminal. Yao turned to the Warrant Officer.

"McGrath, wait in the Pelican" She commanded, and the man turned and marched back to the black transport without a word.

Halsey turned to the Admiral, gesturing to the cuffs on her wrists. "I hardly think that these are necessary, Admiral." She spoke coolly, her expression a mixture of curiosity and disdain.

Yao shook her head "I don't think so, Dr Halsey, Admiral Parangosky

was quite clear about the conditions of your transport." She grabbed hold of her arm, looking unblinkingly into Jake's visor "Let's go, Chief Petty Officer, time is of the essence."

Jake stood rooted to the spot for a second, torn internally, balancing on the edge of a knife, where on one side stood loyalty to the Corps, and on the other stood his intuition, which was screaming at him that this was wrong. He buried his concern, and followed them through grey corridors until they walked through into a large Medical Suite, complete with Omni-Scanners, sterile field generators, and a full surgery. The other three were at one end of the bay. Rachel sat up on an examination bed, Sabina and Josef were crouched down, manually removing her leg armour. Josef looked over and spotted the Admiral, immediately jumping to attention.

"Admiral on deck!" He barked, and Sabina stood to attention by Rachel, who settled with sitting up as straight as a board. Jake paid close attention to Sabina's face, watching a cascade of confusion, anger, disbelief and finally calm indifference wash over her features in a fraction of a second. He also kept an eye on Halsey; she would have instantly identified Sabina, he was sure of that, but what would she make of the others? Her pursed lips and flaring nostrils spoke volumes.

"As you were" spoke Yao, leading Halsey over to a private examination room at one end of the room. "209, with me."

Jake strode across the room, discretely signalling to Sabina with one gloved hand. He entered the small room and closed the door, standing in the doorway. Vice Admiral Yao stood by the wall, looking warily at Halsey, who was standing defensively by the desk, arms folded as much as the cuffs would allow.

After an awkward pause, the doctor spoke. "Jacob. It's been too long." Her voice wavered slightly with repressed emotion and she blinked rapidly.

Jacob grunted, she had always been able to tell the Spartans apart despite their monolithic appearance, and much to their annoyance. Jake slid his helmet off and stowed it, looking at Dr Halsey, then to Vice Admiral Yao, for some kind of explanation.

"Dr Halsey here is currently under arrest for aiding the enemy; she kidnapped Spartan-087, deceived Admiral Hood, and her long involvement in the inhumane and morally reprehensible Spartan-II Programme cannot be overlooked" She listed, keeping her eyes fixed on his. "I'm sorry. Her services are being loaned to us by Ivanoff research station."

Jacob reeled internally, struggling not to let his shock show. How could this be? However, one glance into Halsey's eyes told him that it was all true. He steadied himself before replying "If this is all correct, ma'am, why is Dr Halsey here and not answering for her alleged crimes?"

Halsey cleared her throat "Because officially Jacob, I died when Reach fell. Very convenient for ONI, having me on a leash." She raised one eyebrow "I also happen to be humanity's leading expert on the Forerunners."

Yao nodded. "We need the good doctor's expertise to help us analyse the Forerunner structures beneath the surface."

Jake took all this in "Affirmative, can we attend to my team now? We took out all of the Tyrants, ma'am."

Halsey stood and held out her wrists. "Firstly, these need to go. It is highly impractical to perform medical examinations in this way. Plus, I don't like the comparison to a common criminal." Even under arrest, she was audacious.

Yao walked over and unlocked the cuffs. "You're on thin ice, doctor. Understand that." Halsey rubbed her wrists, her eyes already lighting up.

Jacob walked out of the room and into the med bay, to find Rachel sitting on the edge of an examination table, unarmoured from the waist down, wearing only a tight bodysuit. She was pale and sweating, wincing every time Josef's armour brushed against her swollen knee; Halsey immediately walked over, activating the bed's panel. Josef and Sabina stepped back, and Athena's small avatar appeared before the doctor.

"I am Athena, ship-board AI of the UNSC Hydra, how may I assist you, Dr Halsey?" She chimed, clutching her stone tablet tightly, carrying a caduceus in the other hand.

Halsey blinked "Another 4th gen. I've been kept out of too many loops." She grabbed a tool from the surface next to her, and it glinted in the harsh medical lighting. "Athena, generate a sterile field and take detailed imaging of the left knee. And youâ€¦" She looked Josef up and down dismissively, her voice icy "Get the rest of her armour off."

Josef moved into action, popping release mechanisms in Rachel's battered MJOLNIR suit as the doctor worked. Soon, Rachel was clad in nothing but her bodysuit, and Halsey had identified the injury. As she treated the injured Spartan, Jake began releasing his armour, plate by plate, laying it neatly down onto a nearby surface, tossing the units beyond repair. The discarded units were replaced by brand new ones, taken from the three trollies of crates that Jacob had seen wheeled away from the dropship. Soon he and Sabina were devoid of MJOLNIR, and he felt oddly exposed without the comforting layers of ceramic and gel layers.

It was at this point that Rachel's patella was relocated with a sharp crack, accompanied by a moan of pain and then relief from the pale Spartan. Halsey nodded in satisfaction. "She's done. No serious damage apart from the knee and some minor burns." She turned to Josef "And now for the other III." She said, mouth twitching.

Josef detached the last of his armour and lay down on the bed, letting the omni-scanner hover above him. Halsey muttered to herself as the scan appeared on the screen "Lower bone density than I'd expected. Ackerson's cut a few corners has he? Athena, show me the sites of greatest osteological compromise, and play some music, Debussy's Claire de Lune if you please." She set to work on Josef's injuries as the gentle melody emanated from the PA system.

Jacob tilted his head to look at her actions, a spasm of pain

stabbing up his spine. Sabina sat next to him and he sighed, proceeding to quietly whisper to her, outlining recent developments. Her eyes widened slightly at the information and she frowned uncomfortably.

"Jay, why would Yao say that about the Spartan-II programme? About us? We were needed to defend Earth, and we did so, we helped save the human race from extinction, and this is how they repay us?"

"Because, Petty Officer..." Said Yao from just behind them, just loud enough so that everyone could hear "... the ends do not always justify the means."

Halsey shot Yao a glare, cheeks flushed, jaw clenched, before turning slowly back to her patient. Yao walked over to Jacob and Sabina, addressing the male Spartan in low tones.

"We need to brief the team. The fleet's moving; SENTINEL detected a detachment of covenant ships preparing to intercept us, everything but the Battle-Cruiser, one of the cruisers and a few escort ships is heading this way. ETA 30 minutes."

Jake nodded, looking up as Halsey finished her laparoscopic surgery on Josef. "Understood ma'am" Sabina walked over to be treated, and Josef joined Rachel in re-assembling his armour, swapping out damaged pieces for new ones, grimacing.

"We need to re-insert you." Yao muttered "We still don't know what technology is down there, and you're in the best position to infiltrate the ruins and find whatever it is they're looking for."

"Affirmative, we'll go for HEV insertion." Jake replied, watching Dr Halsey fusing Sabina's fractured clavicle back together with considerably more care and delicacy than she had exercised on the younger soldiers. Sabina was unconscious, knocked out by the powerful general anaesthetic that would normally keep a Marine still for 16 hours. She would wake up in 20 minutes.

Yao cleared her throat and moved towards the door, finger pressed to her earpiece. Jake felt the deck beneath him vibrate and felt acceleration tug at him: the Hydra was gearing up for battle. Halsey looked up from her operation, waving over Jake with a wave of her hand.

"Jacob, the fractures have been repaired and she's stable and will be operational in 15 minutes. Somehow I feel like this room is going to be necessary sooner." She snipped the final stitch in Sabina's exposed shoulder and sealed it with bio-polymer. She lowered her voice "I might not get to say this again Jacob, but it's good to see you, alive." She laid a hand on his arm "I know you and Sabina aren't too happy about my incarceration, but no one can be allowed to get away with what I have done." She smiled sadly "I don't suppose you've heard anything about him?"

He shook his head slightly, internally in turmoil. "No, he's been gone for months, Doctor. There's always hope, especially for John, but even his luck has to run out someday." He sat up on the adjacent bed, tensing at the jolts of pain the action caused him. "My turn,

doc."

She activated the bed and Athena popped up from the holo-pad next to his head. "Well, for a 40-year old man, you've kept in good shape, Spartan. I'm detecting a hairline fracture on the right scapula, and an avulsion fracture to the pelvis, I recommend local anaesthetic, doctor, as we are on a relatively tight schedule."

Halsey leaned over him and cut a small hole in his bodysuit on the side of his hip, rubbing a powerful numbing agent on the skin before making a small incision and inserting two probes into the flesh. Jake felt the metal tools move around, pushing aside enriched muscle fibres and ligaments, reaching the damaged bone. He gritted his teeth against the discomfort, breathing quickly.

"Ma'am, why weren't you on board with the Spartan-III project?" Jake asked through his deep breaths.

She paused, her glasses slipping down her nose a fraction. "I didn't know about the Spartan-IIIs until the fall of Reach. I encountered a fire team of Spartan-IIIs and Jorge during the defence of Sword Base." She stopped talking as she activated the fusing laser against his bone, and he gasped in pain, gripping the edges of the bed. "The threes were an administrator's solution to the problems of the Spartan-II project. The fact is, Jacob, that you and your armour are worth more than most cruisers, and the Spartan-IIIs are considerably moreâ€¦" She tried to find the right words "â€¦ expendable. The reason that my follow up research was cancelled is that I couldn't find enough genetic candidates, not enough with the correct genotypes. The candidates for Ackerson's project are genetically inferior by my criteria, and the modifications used less durable ceramics." She paused for breath, withdrawing the bone-fuser from his hip and beginning to seal the incision. "They couldn't even use MJOLNIR until the last generation of Spartan IIIs and even then the suits aren't on the same scale as yours. And then there's the frontal lobe modifications." She finished sealing the wound, and stepped back from the table. "Turn over, please."

As he lay on his front, something that had been bothering him in the back of his mind was suddenly clarified "The anti-psychotics. They modified their neuro-chemistryâ€¦" He felt her slice open his bodysuit around his shoulder blade and apply the same powerful numbing agent.

"Yes, it gives them an edge in moments of duress, makes them more likely to survive, but as a result, their higher functions are inhibited, and they are more unstable. Hold still" She carried on her operation as she had for his hip.

Jake thought about his comrades, about how fluid and deadly they had fought during the assault on the last Tyrant gun. It made sense. They had been aided by their impaired frontal lobes, all of their energy focussed on survival.

She finished her work quickly, sealing the incision and injecting him with powerful painkillers "You're good to go."

Yao walked over from the corner, looking concerned, brow furrowed

"Chief, Doctor. The Captain wants us on the bridge. The covenant fleet is just about to crest the moon, and Admiral Marden is forming up to attack."

Jacob stood up quickly, rolling his shoulder back to test the movement. "Roger that, Spartans, fall out to the Pelican, grab the weapons, get extra from the armoury if necessary, and get ready for a HEV insertion to the surface." Sabina stood, now awake and clad in her matte-grey MJOLNIR. Rachel stood next to her, in her replacement Scout MJOLNIR, which was a dull grey with blue visor, and Josef stood last, clad in a mixture of his original blue EVA armour and the replacement grey components. They saluted and exited the room, pounding down the corridors towards the hangar.

Jake grabbed a standard slate-coloured Navy uniform from a locker and slid it on over his bodysuit, pulling on the boots quickly. Halsey closed down the medical instrumentation and walked over to the Vice Admiral, who escorted her out of the room. He followed them down narrow corridors, action stations klaxons blaring throughout the passages. They followed the signage to the bridge, and entered the spacious room, walking into a battleground.

****Hall****

As the ONI officer, the civilian doctor and the Spartan walked onto the bridge, Hall was reminded of a bad joke he'd once heard in a Sydney bar. He nodded greetings from his console, before turning his attention to the stream of information coming his way.

"Sir, MAC actuators are at full charge sir, all Archers online and 50mm auto-cannons online."

"Captain, Primary fusion drive is running at 95% efficiency, engines giving 60% thrust forward."

"Admiral Marden sending firing solutions for the Battle-Group now sir."

He looked over the schematics and SENTINEL imagery of the enemy fleet. Two light cruisers, four destroyers and several smaller-tonnage hostiles. They approached the second moon slowly, their plasma lines cool and inactive for the moment. The continuously translated stream of Sanghelli communications streamed along the viewscreen, showing them their enemy's every move. When the lined-up Battle-Group sighted their adversaries, the Hydra would target one of the destroyers, the Jubilant Revelation. The entire fleet was co-ordinated, and more than twenty MAC guns would fire a volley of hypersonic slugs through space at the alien crafts.

The two opposing forces powered towards each other, the Babylon released her compliment of Broadsword interceptors, and the Frigates of the Battle group released their Broadwords and Longswords. The formations of fighters soared ahead of the fleet, on an intercept course with the swarm of Covenant Seraphs and Banshee fighters.

Athena chimed up "Time until line-of-sight is 2 minutes, sir."

"Lieutenant Harrison, fire Archer pods A1 through A6"

"Aye, sir, pods A1 through A6 firing now sir." replied Harrison

On the sides of the destroyer, ARCHER missile turrets rotated in their cradles and activated, sending seventy-two missiles streaking ahead of the vessel, using the moon's gravitational pull to give them a burst of additional speed. Hall watched as other ships did the same, and saw hundreds of vapour trails accelerate towards the moon's horizon.

Athena spoke calmly amid the tension on the bridge. "Line-of-sight establishment in 1 minute sir. SENTINEL systems have identified approximately 50 high-energy plasma projectiles on an intercept course, sir."

"Winters, prepare for evasive manoeuvres."

"Aye sir, engines running at 100% capacity."

Hall looked out of the main view screen, and saw the Covenant fleet crest the horizon. The two menacing, bulbous cruisers lead the pack, four destroyers fanned out on either side, their point-defence lasers powering up, and their plasma weapons cycling. He also spotted the barrage of plasma torpedoes heading straight for them, now 10,000 km distant, glowing an angry blue.

"Fire MAC, staggered shot!" He commanded, and Harrison keyed the fire mechanism.

The entire ship thundered and shuddered as the two main MAC canons discharged gigajoules of energy into two 600 tonne ferrous projectiles, accelerating them to 5% the speed of light within 0.5 seconds, sending them hurtling towards the Jubilant Revelation. A few seconds later, the thunderous roaring of the MAC canons sounded again as a second barrage of MAC slugs was fired. The last volley of fire rocked the ship just after the second, and the rest of the battle-group followed suit. Frigates rocked and bucked as they belched projectiles; the other destroyers and the mammoth Babylon thundered away, loosing a dozen rounds at the enemy formation.

There was no sound for 10 seconds, and then the Archer Missiles, with their gravity-assisted speed boost, met their targets. Some were neutralised by pin-point accurate laser weapons, but the majority of the High Explosive warheads found their mark. All around the curved alien ships, blossoms of fire developed as the charges detonated; the enemy shields shimmered, fire rolling off of their silvery light. The corvettes' and frigates' shields were completely drained under the onslaught, flickering out of existence, the metal of their hulls caving in and collapsing, leaking atmosphere.

Then, the interceptor fighters met in between the two fleets, bright blue plasma fire, the yellow flashes of the UNSC fighters' canons and the vapour trails of UNSC missiles filled the space between the advancing lines of ships.

Hall turned his attention to the incoming plasma fire. "Change heading, 045 degrees starboard, 25 degrees lateral, full burn!" He barked, and the destroyer darted out of the way of the advancing plasma, the torpedoes coming close enough to the hull to melt the port comm arrays.

The plasma bolts curved around in space, looping back around towards the Hydra, chasing after her, gaining ground.

"Deploy countermeasures" Hall ordered, and the destroyer was suddenly ablaze with burning flares ejected from every surface. The plasma torpedoes exploded inside the chaff, scorching the engines coverings.

"Engines hit, sir, evacuating breached lines, re-routing coolant." Said Winters, furiously tapping at his console.

"The Redeemer's been hit sir; hull integrity lost" informed Athena, as the heavy frigate above them was lost to coiling blue plasma. Hall spotted several lifeboats escaping the doomed ship.

"Athena, track those Bumblebees and transmit co-ordinates to the Nightingale." Hall said

"Aye sir, MAC impact in 5 seconds" She replied, her calm tones at juxtaposition with the chaos of battle.

"Sir, the enemy frigate, Righteous Monarch, is hit - her reactor's going critical" voiced 2nd Lieutenant Mallard

On the viewscreen, a small speck flashed bright white, and expanded, consuming a trio of corvettes in its overloading reactors blast, leaving only twisted metal in its wake.

As the frigate exploded, the barrage of MAC rounds struck the fleet. Their target, the Jubilant Revelation, rocked under the assault, its shields flaring as the first two MAC rounds flattened themselves on the energy wall, the huge kinetic energy knocking the destroyer out of line, causing it to spin wildly and crush a nearby corvette, which detonated against the shields, making them flicker. The second round of MAC slugs hit their diminished shield, which died and faded. The doomed destroyer had enough time to fire off a volley of plasma before the final volley gutted her, one slug ripping clean through her midsection, eliminating the control centre, the other burying itself into her rear section, crushing the hull and tearing through the engines. The Jubilant Revelation, venting all of its atmosphere, span out of control, spiralling downwards to the moon below, shedding layers of composite hull and deck sections.

All across the enemy fleet, ships were engulfed in flames, punctured by the immense magnetically accelerated projectiles. As the single ships of the covenant fleet approached them, the Hydra's point defence 50mm canons activated, enveloping the small fighters in overlapping fields of fire before they could do any damage.

"Sir," vocalised the Smart AI "The Divergence is hit, hull integrity is at 10%, Captain Steer has ordered to abandon ship, co-ordinating lifeboat retrieval now, sir." As she voiced her actions, the Infamous-class destroyer broke apart, cleaved in two by concentrated fire from the two cruisers, its halves spinning away into space, the fore section swatting the UNSC corvette Julius from orbit, batting it away.

"Bring us around, get me a targeting solution for those cruisers" Hall ordered. All of the enemy destroyers were damaged, but those

cruisers were blasting their smaller vessels from space.

"Aye sir, solution posited" Series of calculations scrolled across the viewscreen rapidly.

"Fire, Athena." Ordered Hall, before turning to Harrison "Lieutenant, nuclear safe code override is authorised, designation OH-278-D-8."

"Aye sir, FENRIS, HAVOKs and SHIVAs armed and ready sir." The man replied, perspiring visibly.

"Staggered firing, two rounds of MAC, time it so that a SHIVA detonates just as their shields fail" he said.

"Aye sir, SHIVA away." Athena toned, and a single jet of vapour soared away from the destroyer.

"Fire Archer pods B1 through B10 at corvette and frigate escort"

"Archers away."

The lone vapour trail was joined by dozens more as the archer missiles streaked away. Hall saw other volleys from the Babylon and other ships in the battle-group soar towards their targets, and three more frigates disappeared behind the expanding balls of fire.

"MAC away, sir." Came Harrison's voice, and the thunderous racket rocked through the decks.

"Incoming plasma fire, sir, from the cruiser Majestic Deity! Engaging evasive manoeuvres." Cried Winters, sending the ship into a gently roll, presenting a small target area.

"Brace, brace, brace!" shouted Hall, as the last volley of plasma from the downed destroyer combined with fresh fire from the cruiser and splashed across the starboard hull, melting through the armour plating and causing explosive decompression in multiple sectors. The force threw the ship sharply in the opposite direction.

"Decompression in sectors 7-D, C and F, sealing bulkheads" said Athena. "MAC impact in 5."

The massive barrage from the fleet battered the two cruisers, draining their shields rapidly, as the wall of Archer missiles ploughed into the corvette and frigate escorts, decimating their numbers.

Fresh plasma fire from the remaining destroyers burned away the hull and superstructure of the UNSC frigate Injustice; in an act of desperation, she suddenly accelerated, engines glowing white in the darkness as she hurtled towards the covenant lines, trailing flame and burning vented atmosphere in her wake. She crashed into a destroyer, crumpling her forward bows like paper. One single lifeboat ejected from her port side, before her fusion drive detonated, consuming half of the bulbous alien craft in an enormous explosion.

The battlefield had just darkened from the blast, when the SHIVA from the Hydra, along with two FENRIS warheads from the Babylon and three other SHIVAS from other ships, detonated as one, engulfing the remains of the covenant task-force in brilliant white orbs, which blinded the bridge crew temporarily, despite the maximum tint of the main view-screen, before fading to reveal nothing but broken hulls and shattered husks drifting in the abyss.

Hall looked on the tactical screen at the debris around them; chunks of titanium armour plating, scorched and blackened, joined by half-melted parts of covenant hull, the strange purple metal pitted and cratered. The entire covenant fleet, save for the ships still on the surface, had been annihilated, but they were not without their losses: one destroyer lost, another badly damaged, and the Hydra was red-lining their reactors; five corvettes and four frigates had fallen and the remainder were in need of immediate repair. Miraculously, the Babylon had escaped with only minimal damage sustained to her port bows.

The search for survivors began. They painstakingly tracked down and retrieved every stranded lifeboat. In the eyes of the men they rescued, Hall saw what he had expected: fear, despair, anguish, pain, everything which would eventually be the downfall of them. Despite this, Hall saw in the eyes of every single man and woman on his ship something much, much more powerful. The one idea, that no amount of glassing could ever drive out from humanity...

That idea was hope.

7. Chapter 7: Re-entry

There are too many dead thought Captain Hall, eying up the casualty reports from the battle over Sigmus IV; Battle-Group Zulu had engaged a small covenant fleet, and had come out victorious. Every ship that had risen to meet them as they slip-space jumped in system had been neutralised, and yet Hall found it hard to feel like they'd won. They had lost a good third of their Battle-Group, and there was still a CCS-class battlecruiser, two cruisers, a destroyer and several escort ships on the surface of the planet, not to mention the fact that every surviving UNSC ship had been damaged. The Hydra had sustained major damage to the reactor coolant system, and was currently operating on emergency systems, which only allowed the engines to give 50% of their usual thrust.

Admiral Marden had ordered them to hold position orbiting the second moon of Sigmus IV, and to search the cloud of debris for survivors. So far, the Hydra had found and rescued the crews of 4 Bumblebee life-boats, a mix of survivors from various ships, ranging from the corvette Hound to the destroyer Divergence. They had found plenty of other lifeboats; ones that had been hit by stray plasma fire and decompressed causing the lingering demise of all the crew inside, or ones that had been sliced in half by Covenant laser defences. Sometimes they just found the half-melted black boxes of the lifeboats and a small cloud of ionised metal.

Hall looked around from the view-screen, nodding at the black-clothed ONI officer, the civilian doctor, who was looking around the tactical-screens with intense interest and the towering Spartan. Jesus they were tall. He'd heard plenty of rumours about the

Spartans, and they all stated that the Special Forces members were monolithic, but he'd never met one before. Jacob-209, even without the trademark MJOLNIR armour system, loomed over the rest of the bridge crew, easily six feet tall. And there was something about the eyes of a Spartan that Hall would never forget, the trained lack of emotion, the way in which he seemed to look right through him, whilst being absolutely attentive at the same time. It was slightly unsettling.

"Sir, casualty list completed, 24 KIA in sector 7, with a further 39 wounded from across the ship." Spoke the ship's AI, her avatar's orange glow noticeably dimmer than before, reflecting the sombre mood on deck.

"Thank you, Athena. Winters, what's the engines' status?"

Lieutenant Winters looked up from the console, haggard and exhausted. "Main coolant line's fried sir, engineers are working on a solution, but we're stuck on the reserve system until they fix the damage"

He nodded "Then we'll make do. Vice Admiral? What's our next move?"

"My team needs to re-insert to the surface, Captain. We still don't know what the Covenant is looking for under the crater, and with our expert's assistance, we may yet find out." She cleared her throat quietly "We can't risk the Forerunner structures being damaged, so for now, I'm not authorising the use of Orbital MAC rounds to destroy the remnants of the Covenant fleet. I've informed Admiral Marden of the situation."

"Understood, ma'am." Hall confirmed, scratching his neck. "How do you intend to insert, Chief Petty Officer?"

****Jacob****

"Sir, me and my team will insert via HEVs to the planet's surface, approximately 10 kilometres east of the dig sites. If you'd be willing to oblige, the _Hydra_ could provide a distraction, some high explosives in the opposite direction should suffice. From there we'll infiltrate the enemy encampments and into their excavation, gathering data through intercepted voice traffic as we go. We'll find and retrieve any and all Forerunner assets and exfiltrate, potentially commandeering enemy transport."

The Captain stared at him for a few seconds disbelievingly, before straightening himself up and nodding. "I'll prepare the SOEVs now, and I'm sure we can rustle up a few pretty fireworks to keep those hinge-heads occupied. The Battle-Group will establish a polar orbit soon, you'd better get ready, Spartan." Hall moved towards the tall soldier, extending his hand for shaking.

Jacob smiled slightly, and shook the Captain's hand firmly before saluting. The Captain blinked before saluting back, nodding to Yao as the trio left the bridge and headed to the hangar. Halsey broke the silence as they marched.

"Admiral, what exactly is my role in this?" She asked, exasperation edging into her voice.

Yao didn't look at her as she replied "You are to be accompanied back to the Antoinette, where you will provide intelligence support to Spartan-209 and his team."

Halsey flicked a strand of grey hair out of her eyes "So I'm the babysitter, how exhilarating." Her tone conveyed sarcasm, but Jake had grown up with the doctor; her quickened pace and slightly dilated pupils told him all he needed to know about her disposition towards this particular assignment.

They approached the hangar, passing dozens of junctions and not seeing a single living soul. Jake wondered if their path to the hangar was begin cleared deliberately, or if everyone was at battle stations. The answer came from a small holographic projector next to the door to the hangar; Athena's small form flickered into being, and she panted slightly.

"Do you know how difficult it is having ONI on this ship? I've had to re-route at least 54 crew members and lord knows how many service robots because of you. I hope it was worth it." She crossed her arms, tapping one holographic foot.

Yao stopped, tilting her head slightly at the AI. "You're Athena? ATH-2401-7?"

"Yes ma'am"

Yao tapped her datapad a few times, smiling "Been on the Hydra for 3 months, exemplary record." She considered something for a few seconds "Don't get comfortable."

With that, the Admiral keyed open the hangar door, and the three of them entered the hangar once more. Josef, Sabina and Rachel were busy stripping the battered Pelican of all usable equipment and strapping it to their armour. The three armoured soldiers snapped to attention once they spotted Yao, and stood at ease when she reciprocated. Dr Halsey nodded at Sabina from beside Jake, refusing to acknowledge the others; Jake rolled his eyes internally.

"Ma'am, sir." Said Rachel, slipping her M6D onto her thigh holster. "We've salvaged all the weapons from the drop-ship, and sir, your armour is loaded up into the Assembly, ready to proceed. Oh, and this is for you, ma'am" She handed over a small data chip. "This has every recorded covenant comm we intercepted."

Yao took the small silicone square and nodded thanks. "Appreciated, Petty Officer. We'd best be going now" She looked pointedly at Halsey "I'll let the CPO brief you. Come on, Doctor, you have some babysitting to do" She turned around and headed slowly for the black ONI shuttle, answering a call on her communicator in hushed tones.

Seizing the moment of privacy, Halsey turned her back on the Admiral and whispered to Jake, looking up at him. "Jacob, do not put your faith in these toy soldiers, they aren't stable in more than one way. Had you and I met a month ago, you'd have seen some of their handiwork; one of them had a psychotic episode and assaulted me. They are a cheap knock off of you, they are not Spartans."

Jake blinked rapidly, not replying. He wasn't sure he knew

how.

Halsey cleared her throat, speaking at normal volume. "Good hunting Spartans, and good luck" She patted one of Sabina's forearms gently, before turning and following the Admiral, who had halted at the foot of the dropship's ramp, waiting. Jacob shared one more meaningful look with the Doctor before she was marched onto the shuttle, which promptly powered up its engines and glided out of the hangar into the blackness of space.

Jacob was now suddenly aware that the others were all in armour, and he felt naked wearing only Navy scrubs. He cleared his throat "Spartans, we are to re-insert to Sigmus IV and infiltrate the Forerunner ruins, the covenant seek whatever's down there, so we're here to find it first. The Hydra will provide a distraction so that we can re-enter via HEV pods, and mission intel will be provided by Dr Halsey on board the Antoinette." He looked around at the assembled warriors, seeing only their reflective visors. The sooner he got back into armour, the better. "Questions?"

They shook their heads.

"Good, then head to the fore launch bay, I'll suit up and meet you there in 20." He nodded at them and they jogged over to the door, their heavy footfalls echoing around the hard surfaces.

He emerged from the back of the dropship 20 minutes later, encased in olive green MJOLNIR Mark VI, rolling his joints to feel for any restricted movement caused by the new parts, he found no issues, and his shield strength had increased thanks to the new phase generators in his torso.

Smiling, he made his way through the ship, noticing on his HUD how the corridors ahead of him emptied of personnel as he approached, and how the sections behind him filled up again as he exited them. Biblical imagery aside, the lofty Spartan entered the launch bay; along the wall to his left ran a row of open HEV pods, and on his right were his team. Rachel sat on a table, polishing her Battle Rifle, Sabina stood in front of a weapon rack, evidently trying to decide between an M45D Tactical Shotgun and an M90 CAWS, and Josef was leaned up against one of the dividers between two pods, facing dead ahead, but likely checking the latest FLEET-TAC information inside his domed EVA helmet.

As the door closed behind him, Rachel looked up and nodded welcome, jumping down from her perch with a heavy sound of metal on metal. Sabina shrugged and selected the more familiar M90 Shotgun, ratcheting the pump action back and loading the gun. Josef pushed himself away from the wall, grabbing his M392 Designated Marksman Rifle from where it was leant against the pod.

Jake grabbed an MA5D from the weapon rack, slotting it into the weapon holder in the first HEV pod. The others did likewise, stowing their weapons in their respective pods and the air was filled with mechanical noises as rounds were cycled and bolts drawn back, a last-minute check of all the team's weaponry. As they finished prepping their pods, Captain Hall's voice came over the PA system in the launch bay.

"Spartans, co-ordinates set, HEV launch in 5 mikes, we'll unleash a

few pretty lights just ahead of your departure, good hunting, Hall out." The Tactical map of the crater appeared on their HUDs, highlighting the Drop Zone which was just inside the eastern rim of the crater. Accompanying this, a mission chronometer appeared in the centre of the display, counting down from five minutes.

Josef and Rachel stepped into their pods and sealed the doors; Jacob checked their bio readings, both were sweating and breathing quickly, and then he remembered that this was their first live-fire orbital jump, no wonder they were clamming up, sticking to their procedure. Sabina showed no such worries, checking over her own pod visually. He walked over to her and opened up a private communication line.

"Sab, Dr Halsey told me not to trust the IIIs. She said they weren't real Spartans, and that one of them assaulted her. I don't know what or who to believe any more. They've done nothing but excellent work, but if what I think is true actually is, they could be a huge problem." He shook his head, trying to clear the tumultuous storm of conflicting loyalties and thoughts that bubbled around his mind.

She looked at him for a minute before answering "Jay, I don't know what's right and wrong in this world. Are we wrong? 'Morally reprehensible' Admiral Yao called us, just think about that; reprehensible. She thinks that the outcomes of the Spartan-II Project were not enough to warrant the ethical and moral qualms. I think she is wrong. We did, and still do, make the difference in this war." She traced the outline of the green stripes on her thigh armour absent-mindedly. "Sometimes, the ends do justify the means. The same with the others. We can sit and argue about superior muscle density and frontal lobe modifications, but at the end of the day, those two are two of the finest soldiers I've ever met, and this is only their first Op." A long pause filled the air "Anyway, we've got 3 mikes until drop, let's get in the coffins."

Jake nodded slowly, no less divided, but at least he could focus on one thing; the mission. He could worry about ethics and morality later, for now all that mattered was completing his objective and getting his team out alive. "Thanks Sab. Let's get ready to drop." He stowed an M392 into the secondary weapon holster in his pod before checking the status lights on the others' HEVs. All green.

The pod door closed in front of him as he sat down onto the seat, securing his harness quickly. The screens came to life in front of him, displaying the planetary system's detailed tactical map on one side, and Hall's voice came over the comms, clear and calm.

"Spartans, we've started the fireworks display, MAC rounds and ANVIL-VIIs are targeting the strike zone now, good luck, drop in 1 mike, Hall out." The muffled booming sound of the primary MAC guns firing shuddered through the small pods, and on the tactical screen, Jake saw a flurry of silver missile icons sprout from the Hydra and shoot towards the surface.

As the seconds ticked by, the drop sequence began, and a magnetic grapple slammed into the roof of his pod, and the entire frame swivelled round so that his viewscreen faced a solid partition, and the faint lights from inside threw beams against the wall. The air around the pod was suddenly expelled into space, and Jake felt his inner ear pop before the pressure in the pod equalised. Jake heard

his heart pounding in his ears, and felt the buzz of adrenaline coursing through his veins. 15 seconds.

"See you all planet-side, keep your course, and wait until the last minute to pop the rockets. Good luck." He said over TEAMCOM, and received three green acknowledgment lights in the corner of his HUD.

A sudden, jerking acceleration forced him up against his harness, and he clenched his jaw against the jolts of pain emanating from his newly fused bones. He knocked his head against the roof of the pod and swore loudly through clenched teeth as he was propelled out of the fore section of the UNSC destroyer, which fell far behind as he and the other three Spartans shot downwards. As the ride momentarily settled he checked the status of the others, his breath loud and heavy in his ears, everything was going as planned.

He glanced out of the viewscreen, marvelling at the blue/green curvature of Sigmus IV as he rapidly approached the outer atmosphere. He snapped a quick photograph of the beautiful view before returning his attention to his re-entry procedures; as he plummeted towards the centre of the planet, his small alloy-composite pod started ploughing through the atmosphere, causing incredible frictional forces that cooked the tiny vessel.

Flames licked up along the viewscreen, and the internal temperature rose significantly, and the deceleration pulled him into his seat roughly as he broke through the upper stratosphere. He spotted three black specks below him, trailing vapour, and far below them was the crater.

The dome shaped depression looked emptier than he remembered, only a few sleek purple covenant ships were left, and those that did remain were clustered around the very centre of the horse-shoe, glinting in the late evening light. Then, far off to the left of the formation, a series of powerful explosions threw up dust and dirt high into the air, attracting the attention of the swarm of single fighters surrounding the covenant fleet. He whistled softly, keying the TEAMCOM channel.

"There go the _Hydra_'s distractions, make course adjustments and initiate final burn." He ordered, and a trio of confirmation lights responded. The four of them changed their vector slightly and the rockets affixed to the top of the pods fired, boosting them downwards to avoid anti-air fire. They rushed to the ground towards their DZ, a small area on the inner edge of the crater's rim. From the look of the covenant air patrols, they had gone unnoticed, and they were now entering the last and most brutal stage of their infiltration. Jake made sure that his jaw was relaxed so as to reduce dental damage, and relaxed his legs.

As they reached 100m altitude, retro-rockets activated in the base of the pod and a four-pronged airbrake deployed from the roof, rapidly slowing the HEV. His entire body was compressed in his suit and he almost blacked out as the blood in his body was forced into his feet. Then he hit the ground. Hard. He slammed into a tree, turning a tall oak-like specimen into matchsticks in an instant, and his pod buried itself into the soft earth, leaving a 3 metre wide impact crater in the dense forest floor.

Jake shook his head, clearing the black flashes from his vision as the pod's door automatically ejected from in front of him. He stepped out of the HEV, swinging his MA5D around swiftly, checking for hostiles. Finding none, he retrieved his secondary and snapped it onto his back, proceeding to hail the others on TEAMCOM.

"Squad, form up on me on the double." He ordered, moving away from his DZ further towards the covenant fleet. As he moved stealthily through the foliage, the other Spartans joined him, appearing as if from nowhere, forming up behind him in a V formation. Jake noticed that Josef seemed to be limping somewhat, probably as a consequence of the drop, and that Rachel's heart rate was elevated. Their first Low-Orbit jump. As soon as they were far enough away from the DZ, Jake held up a closed fist and turned to face the group, depolarising his visor.

"Alright, the nearest Covenant dig site is 7.8 kilometres west, SENTINEL imagery shows a large fortification built around the excavation, we may need to improvise." He cycled the charging handle on his DMR and looked around at them.

They responded with acknowledgement lights, and they set off as one, silently and swiftly moving through the dense woodland for hours, over rock formations and through shallow streams. The topography sloped downhill slightly towards the centre of the crater, and they moved down the gradient towards the growing sounds of impulse drives and generators; the sound of the covenant hardware was barely audible over the background of mammalian calls and insect noises. Sigmus IV was alive with Earth-like animal and plant species, the main reason for its desirability as a colony. The four Spartans, crouching low to the ground, approached the large alien camp, and Jacob lead them up a mound in the land which gave them overwatch on the entire operation.

Jake signalled for the two younger Spartans to stay at the foot of the hill and keep watch, and as the two Petty Officers took up defensive positions him and Sabina crawled up to the peak of the hill, looking over the camp; the base was located in a flat valley bordered by three shallow hills. Pre-fabricated defences had been erected in a circular arrangement with tall guard towers spaced along the outer wall, which was roughly 800 metres in diameter, the command centre of the base was in the centre of the base, with other purple buildings radiating outwards. Jake spotted multiple barracks, an armoury, a vehicle hangar and what looked like a communications outpost. The only aberration to the standard Covenant layout was the walled-off area just next to the command centre, in which a deep chasm opened up in the ground, into which materials and workers were flowing. The whole base hummed with activity, Grunts and Elites running back and forth between buildings; evidently the covenant fleet's defeat in orbit had had an effect.

Jake ran his eyes over the compound, and Sabina nudged his arm, pointing at one of the barrack buildings closest to their vantage point. He zoomed in on the small outbuilding, and saw a Grunt approach the airlock and enter it, taking off the bulky methane tanks that allowed the short aliens to breathe. He deduced that the barracks must be exclusive for Unggoy and afforded them a self-contained bubble of methane gas. He smiled inside his helmet, nodded, nudged Sabina and crawled back from the summit.

Rachel and Josef met them at the base of the rise, and Jake motioned for them to take a knee. "Listen up, the base looks pretty well defended, plasma turrets and sniper fire from guard towers, and they'll doubtless have motion detectors around the perimeter. We need a distraction. There's a methane environment tent filled with Unggoy just beyond the wall, we detonate and infiltrate in the confusion, aided by our jamming signal." He nodded at Josef "Josef, get up on the hill and sight the exhaust port on the nearest barracks with your SRS-S5. Once you've taken the shot, we'll all insert into the base and into the excavation site. Stealth is preferred."

Josef grunted and moved up the hill and out of sight. The others moved around the slope and settled into the undergrowth, melting into the shadows. Their sniper sent a green light, and Sabina activated the jamming signal in each of their armour systems, cutting the alien base off from the rest of the command system. Jake flashed a green light, and a sharp crack of Josef's SRS firing rent through the air, immediately followed by a high-pitched explosion as the methane atmosphere inside the barracks ignited, engulfing the surrounding area in an immense fireball, which lit up the night's sky a bright orange, casting long shadows around it. The shock wave of the detonation demolished a section of the outer wall; Jacob sent another green light to the team, and they all sprang forwards, Josef sprinted down the hill and joining the others running from the bushes as they pelted towards the smouldering gap in the wall.

Josef reached the wall first, hurdling over the remnants of the boundary, placing a well-aimed kick in between the eyes of a dazed Jackal. Rachel and Sabina were next to enter the compound, keeping close to the wall of the next building as they made their way towards the excavation site. Jacob followed them, tapping Josef's shoulder to get him moving, and together the two of them crept through the base, sticking to shadows cast by organically curved structures. Alarm klaxons roared throughout the base, and aliens rushed towards the site of the blast, many of them clutching small pink canisters that Jake assumed must be fire extinguishers. Come to think of it, UNSC intelligence of the inner workings of Covenant bases was remarkably sparse, so he made sure to snap as many images as he could of the buildings and aliens as they snuck around buildings and across paths, often having to go prone to avoid detection from passing Elite warriors as they barked instructions to Grunts from their four-way jaws.

According to his HUD, Rachel and Sabina were approaching the dig site from a different angle, meandering between rows of tents. Jake checked a pathway for hostiles and darted across it, spotting a lone Sanghelli coming into view from within a sleeping quarters and heading their way. He turned back to Josef from across the pathway, dropping to the ground. Josef was too exposed; from the way the path was angled towards the explosion site, orange light was illuminating his armour. The Elite would likely see the glinting plates, their only chance was if Josef stayed absolutely still. Jake dared not move a muscle as the loping footsteps of the Sanghelli drew closer, from his low vantage point, Jake saw a cloven armoured foot stamp down on the ground in front of him, followed by the other. The towering alien stopped in his tracks, sniffing the air, and began to walk away from their position. Jake felt his heart pounding in his chest and breathed a sigh of relief as he moved on.

Josef threw himself bodily from the shadows, colliding with the

warrior and bringing him down next to the Spartan-II; the Sanghelli barked in surprise and rage, caught off guard with his body-shields down, spitting out guttural phrases at his assailant as he fought to free himself. Jake saw a glint of metal and as the Spartan-III straddled the hostile, he plunged his blade into the alien's chest, sending blood spraying into the air. The creature's howls of agony were still fresh in the air when the young soldier wrenched his knife out of his target and thrust it into the exposed flesh in the neck, pressing his armoured forearm into the Elite's windpipe, crushing his trachea. The alien died quickly, eyes bulging in his long skull, limbs spasming.

Jacob grabbed the younger soldier's arm, dragging him away from the path into the gap between two shelters. He stood above him, fuming internally, furious that the younger Spartan had potentially blown their cover just for one Elite.

"Petty Officer, care to explain?" He growled

Josef stared up into his CO's faceplate. "Sir, I eliminated a threat." He replied, a hint of aggression in his voice.

Jacob clenched his fists "You could have blown our entire operation already, Petty Officer, you took a needless risk to satisfy your own bloodlust, one which you will not take again, do I make myself understood?" He emphasised the 'not' in his command.

Josef stood his ground "Yes sir." He muttered acidly, shouldering his DMR.

Jake shook his head slightly and readied his MA5D, before turning towards their goal, signalling to his unpredictable comrade. Maybe Halsey was right about them after all.

****Hall****

"Mallard, what are our orders from Admiral Marden?" Asked Hall, looking out upon the light side of Sigmus IV from the bridge.

The Lieutenant unhooked her earpiece, looking exhausted "Sir, We are to hold position in low equatorial orbit until either ONI allows a direct strike or until we are fired upon." She added "Admiral Marden didn't seem too happy either Captain."

Hall grunted "Typical ONI. Where is the rest of the Battle-Group?" Once they had deposited the Spartan team onto the planet, the fleet had been divided into two forces, theirs, consisting of the _Hydra, _their sister-ship the UNSC _Chimera, _the frigates _Phoenix, Riptide, Underdog _and _Immortal Bard, _and numerous corvette-class vessels. The hospital ship _Nightingale _hung behind the warships, and above them all was the ONI prowler _Marie Antoinette. _The other taskforce, consisting of the cruiser _Babylon, _destroyer UNSC _Relentless _and the rest of the frigate and corvette class vessels, had moved away from the planet's surface in order to lay a minefield around the planet with narrow exit points at the poles. Hall watched them on the TACMAP as they deployed thousands of nuclear MORAY mines, embargoing the planet from covenant craft.

Athena materialised on her pedestal, writing on her tablet "Captain, Vice Admiral Yao is requesting a direct communication, shall I patch

her through to your quarters?"

Hall nodded, his voice full of apprehension "Thank you, Athena. Winters, update me on the engines' status as soon as I'm free." He walked out of the bridge into the hallway, ducking into his day cabin and closing the door. He straightened his uniform and accepted the Admiral's call.

Her face appeared on the display on his wall, looking drained and tired. "Captain, I've informed Captain Akintola aboard the Chimera, but you are the one who probably knows the most about this operation. Short story is, the Covenant really want something on the planet, and I'm afraid that the fleet we eliminated yesterday was just the welcoming party." She rubbed her forehead, sighing. "ONI tracking stations surrounding the Daedalus star system detected Slip-Space signatures of a similar-sized Covenant taskforce bypassing them on their way here. Estimated Time of Arrival 20 hours, although with Covenant drives, that could be less than 12."

Hall slumped in his chair, rubbing his eyes. "Another engagement. Out of the frying pan." He straightened his back, coughing "Understood ma'am, we'll be ship-shape for the big show." He looked at the Vice Admiral's image, and saw genuine fear in her eyes for the first time.

She nodded "Appreciated. Admiral Marden will complete his defences around Sigmus IV and then relocate to the second moon. We can at least get the drop on the hinge-heads." She hesitated "Captain, I hope you understand the situation. At the end of the day, if the covenant force overruns us, we will withdraw from Sigmus IV, with or without our ground team."

Hall blinked a few times, remembering the stoic images of UNSC propaganda and his own memories of the serious, pale face of Spartan-209. "Understood ma'am. But we're not going to make it easy for them."

8. Chapter 8: Excavation

Chapter 8: Excavation

The distinct intrusion alarm cutting through the night air was the first sign of trouble. Jacob sprinted along the side of a curved hut, checking his motion detector; nothing was heading their way, but it wouldn't be long before the alien horde organised themselves and scoured the base for the intruders. Their only chance to evade immediate detection was to get into the deep round chasm towards the centre of the firebase without being spotted. He peeked around the corner of the building and upon seeing nothing but domed metal buildings glinting in the moon and fire-light, he dashed across the path, the younger Spartan close on his heels as they both kept low, just in case an attentive sniper in one of the guard towers dotted around the outer wall located them.

They were close now, barely 30 metres from the edge of the tunnel, converging on the green contacts on their tactical maps that denoted the other half of their team, Sabina-211 and Rachel-G023. The two male soldiers rushed in between rows of prefabricated buildings, coming to a low rocky rise just before the sheer 40 metre drop into

the hole; they both crouched in the shadows of the nearest building, waiting for the others. The others came within range of their motion trackers, and Jake spotted the two Spartans emerging from the shadows towards them, weapons raised and scanning.

Jacob and Josef emerged from their hiding place, nodding welcome to the others, and Jake approached the edge of the precipice, looking around the circumference for the access points; he spotted a two-metre wide tube of purple metal and transparent composite running up the opposite wall, emanating the tell-tale blue glow of a gravity lift. That would be a speedy exit, but the entrance and exit of the lift were too exposed for his liking. He signalled using his hands to the others, and they quickly began assembling a ground anchoring system, covering the metal peg with dirt and leaf litter. As they worked to secure four high-tension cabling to the anchor, Jake felt that something was wrong, something was missing. Then he realised that their mission intelligence contact, Dr Catherine Halsey aboard the ONI prowler Marie Antoinette, had not spoken a word to them up until this point.

He checked his communications system, on problems there, so then he ran diagnostics on the SENTINEL network of relay/imaging satellites in orbit around the planet, and found their processing power had been maxed out by the vast amount of Covenant voice traffic it had compiled and stored. He set them to stream information directly to the Antoinette's data centre, and immediately a rather irritated Catherine Halsey spoke into his ear.

"Jacob, at last, those SENTINEL satellites have been giving us all a headache, apparently they were never registered on the mainframe. Even ONI's extensive Bureaucracy has its downsides" She sounded amused "Have you made your way into the ruins yet?"

"Not yet ma'am, preparing to rappel into the excavation site now, looks like they used a ship-based energy weapon to break dirt. We don't have a lot of time until they notice us, so I'll have to call you back ma'am." He noticed that the others were already hooked up onto the cables, awaiting his order. He walked over to them and took his place, attaching a cable to the hip of his armour, lining up on the edge of the curved cliff face. As he looked around at the others, he received three green status lights, and as one they jumped backwards over the edge, spooling out cable in front of them as they fell, bending their knees as they hit the cliff face dislodging small rocks from their places. The lines held, and slowly but surely the four Spartans slid down the side of the chasm, until they hung 3 metres above the end of the wall.

Jacob spotted three motion sensor contacts approaching them from in front of them and underneath them, and he twisted his head round to see three waddling Unggoy appear directly below them from a wide cave formation directly under them. They all froze in their positions until the aliens walked along the bottom of the chasm and into the gravity lift, at which point the armoured warriors lowered themselves from the lip of the overhang to the floor, unhooking themselves and shouldering their respective weapons quickly. Glowing covenant beacons lit the way ahead, down a gently sloping cave with a thin layer of mossy vegetation growing on the floor.

"Rachel, set up a comm relay at the cave entrance, we don't want to be in the dark on this." Jake said, and she reached around to her

waist, retrieving a small metal box. She walked over to a large rock and set the box down in its shadow, extending an almost invisible aerial and typing in the frequency of their secure channel. The status light for the relay on their HUD glowed green, and they slowly moved down the sloping floor, weapons raised, crouched low to the ground.

They passed underneath the thick shelf of rock, spread out across the width of the passage, stepping around rocks, weaving between the stalagmites and stalactites that stretched up from the floor and down from the ceiling. Jake hung behind his advancing team and quickly set up a LOTUS proximity mine; if their operation was detected, the 3.5 kilos of High Explosive should buy them some time, and give them ample warning. After securing the mine in its concealed position at the mouth of the tunnel, he stood up and turned down the slope, following his team.

He caught up with them about 30 metres down the tunnel, the only light coming from the pale purple covenant beacons leading into the depths.

"Spartans, I've been doing some analysis of covenant communications about the excavation, you should be approaching the entrance to a Forerunner ruin 30 metres further into the tunnel, recessed into the left hand wall" Came Dr Halsey's clear voice in their ears, accompanied by a small icon labelled with her name appearing in the periphery of their HUDs.

"Understood." Replied Jake, retrieving and affixing a custom suppressor to the end of his MA5D. The door came into view, glowing a ghostly blue, made of smooth grey stone and pulsing with symbols and lights. Around the doorway were obvious signs of attempted entry, broken plasma cutters littered the area, and several scorch marks were evident on the door itself.

The others stacked up on either side of the frame, shoulders pressed into the wall. Jake stood in front of the door, reaching out for a pedestal to one side of the frame, remembering reports from Installation 04 about Forerunner control systems. As his gauntleted hand neared the top of the waist-high pedestal, a bright blue holographic panel flickered into life, symbols rearranging themselves across its surface in a myriad puzzle.

He gingerly pressed the largest glyph on the panel, and the door slid smoothly open in front of him, revealing a long stone corridor. He pointed his weapon down the hallway before nodding at the other Spartans and entering the passageway, closely followed by the three others. He went to activate his night vision filters but realised that somehow the smooth surfaces around them were giving off their own faint light. Perplexed, he led them down the passage and into a network of passageways and smooth ramped staircases, eventually coming out into a large room, with a raised section at its centre. On the raised podium stood three holographic panels.

"Doctor, any help with the translations for these panels?" Asked Jake, walking slowly up to the raised section, stowing his weapon.

"These appear to be control panels for somethingâ€¦" She whispered, her voice taut and excited "One moment, I need to consult my record,

I recognise one of the sequences."

Sabina walked up beside him, staring at the middle panel "I recognise that symbol, it was the same for the door opening mechanism, same shape. It must open a door somewhere."

Jake shrugged "Maybe, but I'm not touching anything without the Doc's say so." He rolled his stiff shoulder, glancing around at the tall walls, still emitting an eerie pale light.

****Josef****

Why are we even here? Thought Josef acidly. _We should be up there, killing those hinge-head bastards, not skulking around down here looking through some ancient Alien's closet._ He shouldered his DMR, glancing around at the room. Rachel was stood next to him, fiddling with her BR-55. His ego still stung from the reprimand that CPO Jacob had given him earlier; he'd expected encouragement from the older Spartan when he'd taken down the lone Elite. After all, wasn't that the whole point of this op? To evict the Covenant squatters from the surface?

What was to be of him and Rachel when the Covenant disappeared for good? They'd been trained since they were six years old to kill the alien aggressors, and after the thrashing the aliens had received over Sigmus IV, Josef wasn't sure if they'd be a problem for much longer.

While Jacob and Sabina fawned over the Forerunner glyphs, he turned his attention to door at the other end of the room, identical to the one through which they'd entered. He sauntered over to the pedestal and thumbed the holographic mechanism when it flickered into being. Instead of the door smoothly swinging open as before, the entire control panel turned a bright red and the door remained closed. Evidently this action had not just affected his panel, because in the corner of his eye he saw Jacob and Sabina swing round in his direction.

"Petty Officer, step back." Commanded Sabina. "What did you do?"

He backed away from the door, hands raised in mock surrender "I just pressed the same button that the Chief pressed on the first door's controls"

Before the others could react to this information, however, they all sprang into action, weapons primed as a motion tracker contact appeared on all of their HUDs and rapidly approached their position. They automatically grouped together and Josef raised his rifle to his chest, scanning the room.

"Don't shoot!" Shouted Halsey down the radio, as a small floating orb of metal descended from above. Instantly, all of the Spartans aimed squarely at the object as it approached. It was roughly spherical, with sections cut from its forward face, and bright yellow light emanated from its core, it's metallic surface was alive with shimmering glyphs and patterns in the same yellow light.

As it descended to shoulder height, it swivelled in the air to face them, glowing slightly brighter than before. No one said anything for 10 seconds.

"It's a monitor" Whispered Halsey over TEAMCOM "Artificial Intelligence units designed to act as curators to Forerunner installations, try communicating with it." She sounded breathless, and Josef could imagine her staring open mouthed at their helmet feeds.

"Identify yourself" Stated the CPO, lowering his silenced rifle slightly. Josef was not so keen to lower his weapon, and kept his crosshairs dead in the centre of the Monitor's body.

The floating construct did nothing for a few seconds, and then replied in comprehensive English, with a similar accent to the CPO's. "Greetings, Reclaimers, I am 278 Abhorrent Revelation, monitor of this installation. How may I be of assistance?"

The Spartans exchanged quick glances between each other, before relaxing slightly and collectively lowering their weapons.

"What is the purpose of this installation?" Asked Jake, clearly being fed questions from Halsey.

"Installation Zeta 89 is a forward resupply and repair facility." Replied 278, his aura flickering along with his speech. "During operational use, this facility could resupply the entire High Fleet in less than five cycles. However, since the firing of the Halo Arrays, the entire planet has been in a state of hibernation."

"Resupply? That doesn't make sense, why would the Covenant be looking for a resupply base?" Muttered the CPO "Abhorrent Revelation, what specifically does this facility do? What supplies do you replenish?"

The Monitor paused for a moment before answering "Vessels, Reclaimer. We were able to construct and launch entire fleets during the Great War, and our capabilities have not diminished."

Sabina cleared her throat "Monitor, how many ships could this facility launch in one revolution?"

"One thousand, three hundred and sixty eight." Replied the AI quickly, turning to face her.

Josef felt his blood turn cold. So this was what the Covenant were after, and why they had so willingly sacrificed their ships. They were trying to activate the shipbuilding planet and amass a fleet so massive it could crush Earth in seconds. If Forerunner technology was half as advanced as Josef had read, they were in serious trouble.

"How would one activate the facility?" He asked the orb, gripping his weapon tightly. One way or another, the Covenant weren't getting their hands on their prize.

"I'm afraid I wasn't given that information during my creation, Reclaimers. I am a custodian to this world, not an operator." Droned 278 Abhorrent Revelation.

****Jacob****

"Doctor, you getting all of this?" Jake whispered into his helmet, reeling in the promise of Forerunner Fleets. "How does a planet this small have enough material for whole fleets?"

"I'm recording this all, Jacob. This is amazing, with this facility we could have enough vessels to never need worry about the Covenant again. My guess is a slip-space bubble in the centre of the planet. The Forerunners seem to have a tendency for that."

"How does Admiral Yao want to proceed?" He asked as Revelation answered Josef's question. "Is this simple asset denial still, or asset preservation?"

"Spartan, I want you to find the control centre first, then we can decide further action." Came Yao's voice, startling Jacob slightly. "We need to prevent the Covenant command from accessing the resources here, they could annihilate us all with a tenth of what this place is capable of. And they know it. FLEETCOM reports that another Covenant Fleet is on its way to this system, ETA 18 hours. We need to find the control centre before they do."

As Revelation finished his response to Josef, Jacob smiled as he remembered details about the other Forerunner installations.

"Monitor, where is this installation's Cartographer?"

"Here, Reclaimer." He replied

"Of course" said Halsey in his ear "The row of symbols on the middle panel are the same as in John's recordings of Installation 04's Cartographer's control panel. Press this symbol, and the map should activate." She confirmed by highlighting one of the glyphs on his HUD.

He nodded at Sabina, who stepped forward and pressed the symbol. A large three dimensional holographic projection of Sigmus IV appeared above their heads, complete with subterranean Forerunner structures running throughout the entire planet. The entire projection shimmered with silvery light which seemed to have no obvious source. The planet spun around quickly a few times, before slowing to normal rotational speed. A small blue icon appeared at their position, pulsating brightly.

"Doctor, what do I press now?" Jake asked, opening up their private comm link to include the others.

"Analysingâ€¦ Try the circular glyph on the left most panel." She said, highlighting it on their visors.

Jake stepped forward and activated the Map Room, rapidly calculating what they would need to do if the control centre was on the other side of the planet. As he pressed the hard-light mechanism, a pulse of blue light radiated outwards from their raised floor section along the floor and ceiling, outlining the intricate maze of shapes and lines etched into the stonework. The holographic orb rippled and turned blue, spinning rapidly before coming to a stop with a red icon on the Control Centre. It was blinking less than 5 kilometres from their locationâ€¦ Right underneath the tiny representation of the CCS-Class Battle-Cruiser hunkered down on the surface.

"Excellent news! Now we can journey to the Control Centre and activate this installation! It has been so long." Exclaimed Abhorrent Revelation, performing a celebratory roll in the air.

"Just one second, 278. Admiral, we've located the installation's Control Centre, but from the Cartographer's data, it looks to be directly under the remnants of the Covenant Taskforce on the surface. They may have even accessed the Ruins already, how copy?" reported Jake.

"Received and understood, 209, working on a solution."

"Spartans, Covenant Battle-Net chatter is ablaze, they found the body of an Elite Commander in the base and they've slipped into a whole other dialect in order to display their displeasure. Recommend immediate exfiltration, it won't be long before they put 2 and 2 together and come down there looking for you." Said Halsey, still calm and collected.

Jake groaned internally and took a deep breath. "Understood, ma'am" He turned to his team, cricked his neck and turned off the holographic Cartographer. "Well, at least we know they're coming." He chuckled softly, a rare occurrence. "Revelation, can you meet us in the Control Centre? We might need your help in working the mechanisms" He said, carefully choosing his words.

"Of course, Reclaimer, the service tunnels lead right onto the Control Complex, although regrettably the access tunnels are unpassable." Chimed the Monitor, speeding away towards a small hole in the far wall. "I shall await your arrival there!"

As the yellow light faded away, Jake sighed. "How do we tell him that we're not activating this place? Our primary directive is asset denial, and ONI can learn a hell of a lot more by establishing a research base, much more controlled, rather than having thousands of ships being pumped out of the planet every day."

"Sir, we woke him up from hibernation, surely we can order him back in?" Asked Rachel, shifting her weight from foot to foot.

"Agreed, plus, if he doesn't like the idea, we can always decommission the little light bulb." Josef said, smirking slightly behind the visor.

Sabina shook her head, folding her arms. "I think he'd be a lot more use to the UNSC alive, Petty Officer."

Jake nodded "Plus, you're not exactly the king of good ideas today, are you?" He punched the younger Spartan in the shoulder lightly. A bit of gentle ribbing never failed to boost morale.

Josef snorted, responding only with a shrug and the muttered words "Devil's Advocate"

A sudden shockwave shuddered through the room, followed seconds later by a deafening boom which echoed off of the walls. The Spartans immediately snapped into action, raising weapons and adopting firing stances, all trace of friendly banter gone.

"Well, I guess that's our welcoming party" Muttered Rachel "They must

have found our little present. I do hope they liked it."

Jake opened the door and led them back towards the surface, jogging through stone hallways and up staircases until they approached the door into the cave. Jake turned and nodded to the others before slowly reaching up and opening the door. They darted out into the dimly lit tunnel and headed up to the mouth of the cave. The LOTUS mine had done its job.

Body parts and blood were everywhere, radiating outwards from a ragged crater. Judging from the sheer volume of fluorescent blood painted across all surfaces, there had to have been a whole patrol present when the explosive detonated; Rachel almost tripped over the severed arm of a Sanghelli still clutching a plasma rifle in its three-fingered grasp. As they approached the lip of the rock shelf above them, Jake held up a clenched fist and the others halted, crouching down amongst the rubble as he ventured further forward, looking up around the chasm's rim.

Covenant combat troops lined the edge, all of them roaring and growling down at him. He must be only a speck to them, but he could almost feel the combined hatred being directed towards him. The Sanghelli, Unggoy, Kig-Yar and even a few Mgalekgolo were all moving towards the single gravity lift down into the excavation. Even as he watched, a dozen Unggoy descended to the chasm floor and began heading their way.

"Sheisse." Whispered Josef, zooming in with his rifle on the throngs of aliens crowding into the gravity lift.

Jake waved him back into the shadows of the cave, calculating a way to get out of this. He formed a rough plan in his mind, turning to Rachel. "Set up a LOTUS outside the entrance and transfer the detonation code to my suit." She nodded and sprinted back into the cave, clutching a flat mine in her hands.

"Jay, you can't be serious? We can't hold out against a force that size." Sabina said, fiddling with her shotgun nervously.

"We don't have to Sab, just long enough. If we just head into the tunnels now they'll follow us. If we cause a bit of panic up here, thin the ranks a little, then fall back into the ruins, we may be able to find a passage out of here." He replied. The squad of Grunts was now closely followed by a dozen imposing Elite warriors, brandishing Energy Swords and Storm Rifles, growling loudly.

"We don't have much time, set demolition charges around the Lotus, as much C-12 as we have between us, when that mine goes off, the whole cave is coming down, go." He ordered, tossing her his supply of the composite High Explosive. She caught it deftly in one hand and nodded, before retreating away from the entrance. Jake looked at Josef, shouldering his DMR. "You and me, Petty Officer are the frontline. Simply put, we drop as many of them as possible as quickly as possible, understood?"

The young Spartan nodded, sliding back the bolt on his SRS-S5 Sniper Rifle with a metallic clunk. "Sir, it would be my genuine pleasure."

With that, the two positioned themselves behind larger pieces of

rumble at the entrance of the cave, levelling their weapons, and unleashed a barrage of pinpoint-accurate fire that brought squealing Grunts and snarling Elites to the ground. Jake squeezed off a full clip into the advancing wall of orange, red and blue coloured armour, causing alien shields to flare and crackle. The high velocity armour piercing rounds from the sniper rifle ripped through unshielded enemies and exhausted Sanghelli energy shields in one shot. But as quickly as they two Spartans could down enemies, more would replace them.

"Josef, pull back, I'll cover you, Rachel and Sabina, take up defensive positions 20 metres inside the cave, move." Jake ordered. He retrieved an M9 Fragmentation Grenade from his belt and pulled the pin. As Josef sprinted back from his cover, he tossed the heavy explosive over the younger Spartan's head, and it sailed through the air and landed at the feet of the advancing horde. Jake waited for the dull thump before standing up from behind his cover and firing his weapon into the crowd. Those Covenant left standing were staggering around, dazed by the shock wave; he put them down with calm efficiency, swivelling his torso around as he quickly targeted and eliminated four Elites.

He tossed another grenade over his shoulder as he crouched behind his cover; as the second blast rang out he darted into the cave past the others and slid behind a stalagmite. They all crouched behind rocks, aiming their collective weapons up the sloping cave towards the opening, waiting for the inevitable assault.

A lone Grunt poked his head over a rock by the entrance, squinting into the darkness, a single shot rang out from Josef's rifle, and the Grunt disappeared from sight, minus one head. The panicked screams of his brethren carried down into the depths, and Jake suppressed a smile. Nothing moved. Jake could hear the shuffling of alien feet and the barking of the Sanghelli commanders, but nothing ventured into the cave. Jake was suddenly aware of the sound of his own breathing, and the pounding of his heart in his ears.

A loud roaring filled the air, a guttural cry of rage and battle. No, not one roar; twin roars. Jake swore under his breath. "We've got Hunters."

****Hall****

"Hasn't Marden gone a little overboard with the minefield?" Mused the Captain, staring at the web of proximity charges enveloping the planet. "He didn't paint us into a corner, did he?"

"Negative, sir, there are polar gaps in the network." Replied Athena, highlighting the safe areas. "Although Admiral Marden is known to be ostentatious."

Hall grunted "That he is. Right then, what's our status?"

"Engineering has reported that the engines can now give 65% power, and that they can do no more without a serious refit station. Weapons are fully operational and the Fusion reactors are running at full capacity, although the vending machine on deck 24-B seems to have run out of sugar. We're as ready as we can be sir." She said, displaying all the information on the main view-screen.

He nodded curtly "And the Covenant re-enforcements?"

"The _Antoinette_'s sent us a revised estimate of less than an hour, Captain. Apparently they are breaking all the known laws of physics to do it, but that's the Covenant for you, always doing the impossible to ruin our day." Her holographic avatar shrugged and adjusted her toga.

"Alright people, let's get ready, I want to hit them where it hurts before they get a chance to reciprocate" Hall announced, and the bridge crew all nodded in response.

Hall settled down into his chair. "Athena, where has Marden disappeared to? If the Slip-Space estimate keeps shrinking, we're going to need the _Babylon_'s firepower sooner than expected."

"The _Babylon_ and its escort are currently in position in orbit around the second moon. It would appear that we are the bait in this scenario." Athena said coolly, raising one eyebrow.

"Outstanding." Muttered the Captain, shaking his head slowly.

"Captain, the Vice Admiral has updated us on the Forerunner Asset on the planet, for your eyes only sir." Said Lieutenant Mallard, forwarding the message to him. He typed in his security code, and immediately schematics and diagrams, along with a recording of what looked like a floating basketball talking appeared on his screen. He scanned through the message, eyes widening as the enormity of the situation struck home. He deleted the message and its contents and settled down into his chair.

20 minutes passed, and Hall busied himself catching up on FleetCom memos and briefings. He was just reading the announcement of a planned memorial service on Earth when the contact alarm rang through the bridge.

"Sir, small enemy force coming out of slip space approximately two million kilometres off planet, count one cruiser, four destroyers and escort, calculating firing solutions." Harrison said, hands flying across the controls at his station.

"Sir, something's wrong, their shields are still downâ€¦ And their plasma weapons are dormant, not so much as a flicker of power being fed through the fuel lines" warned the AI, looking puzzled. She brought up the visual of the small fleet on the main viewscreen. Several menacing hulls glinted on-screen, but their formation was nothing like anything Hall had ever seen in battle. There was no tactical placement of the destroyer escort to maximise the available weaponry, no angry red pinpricks of light forming on their lateral lines.

"An open hail sir, from the lead cruiser." Athena said, and the viewscreen was suddenly filled with the head and shoulders of a white-armoured Sanghelli Shipmaster, his split jaw parted as he spoke. Athena quickly activated a translation programme, which overlaid the guttural language with a neutral English translation.

"I am Shipmaster Cro 'Cylenee of the 4th Fleet of Retribution, under the command of Thel 'Vadam of Sanghelios. We mean no harm to Human forces in this system. We come here to root out and punish the war criminal Mal 'Furak."

Hall cleared his throat, unsure how to respond. "Um, Shipmaster, I am Captain Hall of the UNSC Hydra. If I'm understanding this correctly, and you are allied with the Arbiter, Thel 'Vadam, then we are both obliged to act in accordance with the Peace Treaty of 2553. We may even be able to assist you in your goals." He swallowed hard. He wasn't a negotiator, but then again, no negotiator in the UNSC had been properly trained for a situation as unique as this.

The beady-eyed alien listened as the Captain's words were translated by a shorter, golden-armoured Elite next to him. He sniffed the air a few times, as if smelling for treachery, before replying. "Very well, Captain, you will give us access to the planet's surface and then we will drive out the cowards and destroy their scourge. There shall be none left to desecrate the stars with their filth."

Hall nodded and terminated the link, before sinking into his chair and wondering just how messy the situation planet-side was about to become.

9. Chapter 9: Installation

****Rachel****

Rachel threw herself roughly to the ground as the ball of green energy sailed through the air and crashed into her previous cover, throwing rubble everywhere and scorching the area around it. She scrambled into a shallow trench, debris raining down onto her back, deflected by her shields, which slowly recharged.

"Supressing fire!" Ordered Jacob-209 over the COMMS, and she heard the steady rapport of Josef's SRS-S5 rifle as he targeted their adversaries. She checked herself for damage as she lay on her front, relieved to find all limbs still attached. Sabina's MA5D Assault Rifle joined in the attack, spraying the massive armoured beasts with Armour Piercing round, to little effect. The giant Hunter combat troops shrugged off the hail of bullets, crouching behind the monolithic shields on their left arms, grunting. Even at 30 metres distant, they seemed massive in the confined space of the cave.

"Petty Officer, you hit?" Asked the CPO, taking aim with his DMR and squeezing off a few well-placed rounds into the soft unprotected torso poking out from behind the lead Hunter's shield. The creature groaned loudly and shifted its body, its massive energy weapon glowing brightly as it charged, ready for another shot.

"Negative" she reassured, dragging her BR85 Rifle from under her and resting it on the lip of the shallow depression, sighting up on the trailing Hunter. She took careful aim, and fired a three round burst into the alien's midriff, and it issued a similar grunt as it shuffled around to protect itself.

She rolled away out of the ditch just in time, a swathe of green energy bathed the location seconds later, scorching the rock and

dirt. She slid behind a rocky formation jutting from the cave wall, poking her head out from cover to analyse the situation. They had been pushed back into the long cave, firing everything they had at the advancing Mgalekgolo pair. The massive forms were not actually one begin, but a colony of small eel-like creatures, who structure themselves in a form that massively increases their manoeuvrability and strength. They fought in pairs, the exact nature of which was still unknown to the UNSC, they only knew that if one Bond-Pair was killed in combat, the other would go berserk, killing anything in its path to avenge its fallen team mate. That's if they had enough firepower to bring the massive combatants down; they were covered in starship-grade composite armour, with only a few chinks available for exploitation, usually in the small of the back or neck.

The lead Hunter shuffled further into the cave, its mate following close behind. They needed to take them out before they were reduced to really close quarters fighting, and Rachel had an idea on how to do it. She had always been the fastest runner in her old Fireteam, leaving most others in the dust when she raced.

"Grenade!" Sabina pulled the pin on a Frag grenade and tossed it towards the Hunters, taking advantage of their momentary steps backwards in the wake of the detonation to pump a few rounds from her own Battle Rifle into the exposed midsection of Hunter number 1. As the others blanketed the Hunters with fire, Rachel dashed out from her cover and ran along the left hand wall of the cave towards the exit, weaving in between rubble. She sprinted up alongside the recoiling aliens and darted towards them, stowing her Battle Rifle and wielding her M7 SMG. She approached the second Mgalekgolo at lightning speed, ducking under its spikes protruding from its back and pressing the muzzle of her M7 into the orange flesh under the armour, pulling the trigger and emptying 60 caseless rounds into the crawling mass of worm-like beings. The Hunter twitched and groaned, slumping over forward onto the ground with a heavy boom; its partner spun around, emitting a low screaming noise, and charged at her.

She dived out of the way of the five-ton alien, but it was quick; as it passed by her, it swung its massive shield, swatting her from the air. Shield warning sounds blared in her ears as she was bodily thrown further into the cave, tumbling down the slope. Oddly enough, she felt no pain, although her flashing biomonitor system warned of cracked ribs and internal haemorrhaging. She stood up, stumbling forwards towards her team. She drew to a halt before Jacob-209, who was saying something over the comms, but she couldn't understand the words. Blackness ate at the periphery of her vision and she slumped to the ground, fighting to stay conscious.

****Sabina****

Sabina had been forced to watch from her defensive position as the small Spartan had made her assault, expertly dispatching the trailing Hunter, and had had to watch on as she was brutally assaulted by the other, all the while taking shots at any exposed flesh she could see. Even as Rachel stumbled towards them, her helmet visor cracked, the remaining Hunter was turning around, charging its heavy weapon.

"Rachel, get behind me" ordered Jacob, but the injured soldier just collapsed slightly next to him, barely staying upright. "Damn it, Josef, get over here and drag her back towards the door."

A green acknowledgment light came on next to Josef's icon on the TEAMCOM display on her HUD, and moments later he appeared next to them, he draped one of Rachel's arms over his shoulder and helped her retreat further into the cave.

"Sab, if you've got any ideas, now's the time." Muttered Jacob, sliding a fresh magazine into his Assault Rifle and ducking behind his cover as a large bright green bolt of energy slammed into the boulder.

She popped up from behind her position and fired her Battle Rifle. Bullets deflected off of the Hunter's armour, and it growled deeply. It moved further into the cave, swinging its 2 ton weapon and demolishing a row of stalactites to make room for its monolithic body. Sabina reloaded her weapon, looking behind her and spotting a purple crate of covenant ordinance. She crawled over to the small box, opening it to find exactly what she had been hoping for; a neat row of three Type-1 Antipersonnel Plasma grenades.

"Got one." She said, priming one of the grenades and throwing it over her cover. The ball began throwing out a ball of plasma gas, glowing bright blue as it arced and struck the Hunter's shield, immediately ionising and adhering to the dark blue metal, glowing brighter. The alien growled loudly, but its yell was quickly overcome by the rising pitch of the plasma grenade's whine as it ate through the metal and detonated, vaporising anything within a 2 metre radius. Once the flash had subsided, half of a Hunter's still wriggling corpse lay on the floor, the large Lekgolo worms writhing on the ground. Jacob poked his head up from cover.

"Good kill, Sab, grab anything else you've got and get ready to move, because this won't be the last of them, not by a long shot." He was referring to the large Covenant force currently forming up outside the mouth of the cave.

"Affirmative." She replied, stashing the other two plasma grenades and reloading her rifle. "Hold the line, I'll be back in one." She moved back towards Josef and Rachel, who were leant up against the cave wall next to the entrance to the Forerunner tunnel system. Josef looked up at her as she rounded the corner, reaching to grab his DMR rifle instinctively.

"At ease, I need your SRS." She said, and they traded weapons and ammunition, he took her Battle rifle and she shouldered the Sniper Rifle. "Be ready to move, both of you, we can't hold the line for much longer." She said, giving Rachel a thumbs up, which she weakly returned.

She darted back to her original position and rested the Sniper, complete with bipod, on her cover, pointing it squarely up the slope towards the cave mouth. She looked through the scope, adjusting for the inclination, and waited for her first target.

Suddenly, the entire cave mouth was filled with targets. Grunts, Elites, Jackals, every rank waving every weapon as they charged into the tunnel. Needle shards rained down, and plasma fire sputtered from the advancing crowd. She calmly began picking her targets, downing Elites and Jackals quickly and efficiently, and she could hear Jake open up with his Rifle, cutting through the Grunt ranks. Frag

grenades sailed through the air as Jake and Sabina slowly fell back towards the door, covering each other's withdrawals with sustained fire and grenades. The increasingly accurate plasma fire harried their retreat, scorching the walls and leaving a sharp metallic taste in the air.

"Sabina, pull frags and let's go." Ordered Jake, priming his last grenade and tossing it. She did the same, and before they had even landed the two soldiers were both ducking into the Forerunner corridor, following the two younger Spartans into the tunnel system. As they rounded the corner into the Cartographer room, the C-12 enriched LOTUS mine detonated, creating an immense fireball that instantly barbecued nearby Covenant troops and collapsing the cave on top of the rest. The extended rumbling of the tunnel collapsing echoed through the tunnels. They came to a halt inside the Map room, barely breaking a sweat.

"Well then, that could've gone worse." Mumbled Jacob, depolarising his visor to reveal a grin. The adrenaline was wearing off, and Sabina felt heavy and exhausted, drained. But she pushed those thoughts to the back of her mind, and enjoyed the brief moment of relief.

"What now?" She asked.

"We may not be able to get to the Control Centre from here, but we can look for another way out to the surface." Jake replied, activating the Cartographer with a wave of his hand. "Unfortunately, the comms relay will have most likely been destroyed, so there's no way of contacting Command, but we can re-establish contact once we return to the surface."

Josef nodded, "How much trouble do you think we've caused these hinge-heads?" he asked, sounding satisfied.

Jake didn't reply for a minute, staring at the holographic map, calculating a route out of the tunnels. "More than enough, Petty Officer, more than enough."

****Shipmaster Cro 'Cylen, 4****th**** Fleet of Retribution, aboard the cruiser **_**Sanctified Dawn**_**

"Shipmaster, the Human fleet has powered down their weapons systems, and the enemy has been located on the surface of Larris." Barked the Sanghelli officer, bowing slightly. Larris was the Sanghelli name for the planet below, which had once had enormous significance in their religion. The San 'Shyuum had ordered a missionary exploration of Larris when they had been in charge of the Covenant, and even established a research facility in orbit, but during one of the many Grunt uprisings the station had been destroyed, and the planet was forgotten upon the discovery of the Halo ring.

'Cylen disliked the Human name for this place, 'Sigmus IV". It was so clinical, so dispassionate, lacking all creativity, like the rest of their weak race. It was so tempting to blast this pitiful human force from orbit, to heat the plasma and evaporate the ugly grey vessels. The Arbiter may be convinced that the two empires could co-exist, but 'Cylen wasn't entirely convinced; for all the talk of humans being weak and cowardly, they were certainly resourceful creatures, and sly as well. Unlike most of his compatriots, he held a certain level of

respect for them.

"Show me the coward's hiding place so that I may vanquish him." Growled the Shipmaster, and the purple-tinted projection of the crater in which Mal 'Furak's fleet lay. "How many ships does he have at his command?"

"Preliminary scans show one CCS-Class Battlecruiser, the _Enlightened Prophet_, two CPV-Class Destroyers, three Corvettes, and five SDV-Class Corvettes." Reported another officer on the other end of the bridge.

"The _Enlightened Prophet_?" He mused, clutching the arms of his levitating command chair "I thought she had been destroyed in the Great Schism." This was not good; the _Sanctified Dawn_, the flagship of the 4th Fleet was a CRS-Class cruiser, of much lower tonnage and offensive capability, the information they had paid the Kig Yar for had apparently not been worth the cost, as they had far underestimated the size of the Loyalist fleet. "Very well, it shall be an even fight. What is the status of the Fleet?"

Flashing status lights appeared in the holographic display, and the shipmasters from every ship in the Fleet called in the status of their vessels; no abnormalities so far.

"Shipmaster, the human destroyer has transmitted the co-ordinates of access points through their minefield." Said the first officer.

"Good, descend to the planet's surface and attack the ground forces. We need that Battle-cruiser in repairable condition." He ordered. Ever since the Covenant collapse, the Sanghelli fleet had settled into disrepair, and the number of operable hulls had dwindled. Now the Arbiter needed ships more than ever, to combat a civil war that had erupted on Sanghelios between Thel 'Vadam's forces and a religiously fanatical group called the Servants of Abiding Truth, who thought that 'Vadam's declaration that the Forerunners were not the gods that religion dictated was heresy of the highest order.

He thought a second, then amended his orders. "If the _Enlightened Prophet_ cannot be captured, I would rather see her burn than in the hands of this deserter." His venomous tone was met with growls and roars of approval from both his bridge crew and the collection of shipmasters on the communications network.

"Take us into polar orbit and deploy our ground forces. This is an invasion, be aware of disloyal members of their ranks who may feel compelled to abandon the traitor's ways." He paused, checking that he was broadcasting to the entire fleet "We do this for the good of Sanghelios, and all of our fragmented empire. Do not fail us, and you shall secure our place in the galaxy for the next Age. Act swiftly. Act boldly. Fulfil your duty. Shipmaster Cro 'Cylen out."

****Hall****

"Sir, the Arbiter's Fleet is establishing polar orbit, under the minefield." Athena informed him. Their group was staying in geostationary orbit, looking down upon Sigmus IV. "I do hope they don't glass the planet, there are plans with the CAA for a health spa

and beauty centre, and if the surrounding countryside is molten slag, it might detract from the relaxation slightly."

"Unlikely." Said Mallard "Their shipmaster has decreed that the battle-cruiser is to be taken whole. It's quite the speech actually, very heroic."

"How noble." Muttered Hall "Has Admiral Yao re-established contact with her team on the surface?"

Athena stared into the distance for half a second, the orange holographic symbols rolling across her body intensifying in their movements. "No sir, and I think you can call them Spartans, the entire fleet is talking about them. News spreads fast it would seem. I wonder how the 4th Fleet of Retribution would feel about having 'Demons' on their battlefield." She smirked slightly.

"I'm guessing not ecstatic." Hall replied. He flexed his fingers uncomfortably. "I feel so helpless up here. We can't do anything, we just look on from up here. Part of me isn't used to this kind of warfare, sitting and waiting." He shook his head, clearing his thoughts.

"Sir, the enemy fleet is moving." Warned Athena, and red flashing lights appeared on the tactical map "All vessels gaining altitude and charging plasma. They might not have noticed our littleâ€|"

As she spoke, a corvette came within the radius of the proximity detonator on a MORAY mine, which blossomed in a brilliant white, silent explosion, engulfing the unshielded ship in a nuclear fireball. The rest of the formation halted and lowered back into the atmosphere, point-defence lasers glowing an angry red.

"â€| surprise. Well, now they know about the mines." Finished the AI, shrugging. "Judging from their acceleration and new radio chatter, the enemy is preparing to engage the Arbiter's forces, sir. I've done battle prediction calculations, and the 4th fleet has less than a 30% chance of surviving."

Hall paced the bridge, listening to the news. He sighed deeply "Get me Vice Admiral Yao. We might need to help some hinge-heads."

****Jacob****

He was really starting to hate Forerunner tunnels. They had been marching through dimly lit passageways for hours now, swinging their rifles around every corner, hitting collapsed tunnels and solid walls every 20 minutes. Their radios had been full of static since their relay was destroyed, but occasionally garbled UNSC radio chatter would break through the thick isomorphic walls of the ruins, routine messages between ships, the words were unintelligible.

"Sir, where in the back end of hell are we?" Asked Josef, sounding frustrated.

He looked backwards into the visor of his comrade. "If you believe the cartographer, about 200 metres away from an exit to the surface." He turned back towards the front, but as he looked over the passage walls, something caught his eye. "Hold up."

The others took positions around him, pointing their weapons into the darkness on either side of them, and he scrutinised a section of the glyphs that adorned the walls around them. He activated a basic translation programme in his HUD, and highlighted a series of symbols which seemed familiar; the programme scanned the symbols and ran it through the admittedly minimal data that Dr Halsey had been able to provide. After three agonisingly long seconds, the programme chimed and overlaid the English words over the short line of glyphs.

"**Ring-world Installation 03. Primed.**"

He stared at the simple status message, awestruck. He recorded as much of the stone panel as he dared, then straightened up, shaken slightly. "Okay, when we get back to ONI, they are going to have a field day looking through our helmet video feeds. Let's move, the exit is just ahead."

They moved further down the corridor, and Jake's NBC filter system in his helmet told him that there was a higher concentration of organic molecules in the air; they were approaching an exit.

"Got a door." Rachel announced, crouching down next to the frame. Josef stacked up on the other side of the doorframe, and Sabina crouched in front of the doorway, pointing her shotgun towards it. Jake stood in front of the control pedestal and moved his hand over the surface, keying the mechanism. The door swung smoothly open to reveal a rather surprised squadron of Unggoy workers. The trio of Grunts didn't even have time to drop their tools before Sabina fired into them with her M90, spattering her armour with blue blood and killing the unfortunate aliens instantly.

She pumped the action, ejecting a spent cartridge onto the floor, and moved lithely through the doorway. Josef and Sabina peeled away from the walls and followed her through, and Jake took one last look around the stone tunnel before stepping out into the bright early morning sunlight. They had emerged onto a mountainside overlooking the crater, and Jake was momentarily stunned by the spectacle before him.

The entire Covenant taskforce was taking off, the deafening roar of star-ship sized impulse drives turned up to full power maxing out the helmet filters and shaking him to the core. The graceful silhouettes of the formation of Covenant ships slowly rose from the bottom of the crater and soared into the air. His HUD identified the different ships, displaying their tonnage, class and service history next to them on his view. The massive bulk of the CCS-class Enlightened Prophet dominated the area, at almost 1800 metres long, it dwarfed the destroyer and frigate escort which hung around it like a school of pilot fish hangs around a shark. The entire group rose from the ground and accelerated towards them, almost brushing the top of the mountain high above them, shaking the earth beneath with their combined air displacement.

As the fleet thundered overhead, Jake snapped out of his awestruck state and began hailing the Marie Antoinette. On his third attempt he initiated handshake protocols and established a secure line.

"Spartan-209 reporting in, repeat Spartan-209 re-establishing contact." Jake said, signalling to his team to take a knee. The radio was filled with static for a few seconds before Dr Halsey's tones cut through.

"Jacob, you're alright. Thank god." She sounded slightly panicked, but she soon adopted her usual calm tone. "While you were inside the structures, the new Covenant fleet jumped in-system, but they're Covenant Separatists under the control of the Arbiter. Shipmaster 'Cylen has been tasked with eliminating a Sanghelli Loyalist, but he brought a knife to a gun fight, sending tactical data now."

"Affirmative, ma'am, we spotted the Loyalist Fleet launching from the surface, heading North at speed." He replied as the transcript of developments scrolled across his screen. "We need to get to the Control Centre, any help?"

"I've had five hours to work, what do you think?" Asked Halsey, and Jake could just imagine her smirk. "I've tapped into the Battle-Net and it was under the Enlightened Prophet, underneath a Covenant Firebase. You made quite a mess at the excavation site, the entire Loyalist group is seething. We've also confirmed that the Sanghelli Loyalist that the good Shipmaster is looking for left his flagship with his second in command, who has proceeded to engage the Separatist fleet in polar orbit. Should be a good show."

"Sounds awkward." Sabina commented, looking down into the suddenly empty crater.

"Indeed, the marker on your HUD should lead you to the Control Centre, there are still substantial ground forces in the area, as well as combat air patrols. Good luck Spartans." An orange beacon appeared on their maps, but before they could start to head down the rocky mountain, the sky behind them lit up as a second sun blossomed in the sky.

Jake's radiation detector spiked, and a small shock wave rippled through the air, leading to a muffled booming which echoed around the hills and valleys. Josef's head whipped around, and before he turned his own head, Jake spotted a bright pinpoint reflected in his domed visor, which was realised in the sky to the North, a slowly fading ball of light.

"What was that? Nuke?" Asked Josef

He was answered a second later by a sharp peak in radiation levels detected by all four sets of armour. On the newly updated tactical displays, a covenant corvette winked out of existence from the centre of the fireball.

"Just the calm before the storm, Petty Officer, let's get going." Jake replied, and began the long trek down the mountainside, navigating down rocky cliff faces and sliding down scree-covered slopes. The others followed close behind, and he heard the heavy thuds of either Josef or Rachel stumbling; they weren't as well trained as he and Sabina were for mountainous terrain, he would have to make a note of that for future reference.

They reached the plateau at the foot of the mountain and started on

the well-hewn pathway created by Covenant vehicles towards the crater. As they walked, Rachel sidled up to him and matched his pace, tapping her rifle rhythmically, as if nervous of speaking.

"Permission to speak, sir?" She asked, looking dead ahead.

Jake nodded, curious. "Granted, Petty Officer."

"Thank you sir. I had some questions about the Spartan-II project." She sounded wary, cautious of the content of her speech.

He paused, trying to figure out if he was even allowed to talk about the project with a Spartan-III. He supposed that these sorts of situations were the ones that ONI was trying to judge them by. "Okay, I can tell you some things, but don't expect me to know everything, fire away."

She straightened up slightly "Firstly, is it true that a Spartan-II is never classified as KIA?"

He chuckled "That's your first question? It's as good a start as any I suppose, yes, when the programme was made public, it was decided that any and all casualties be reported as Missing in Action, in order to maintain the illusion of invincibility which was keeping up morale." He shrugged "But I can assure you, Petty Officer, that we are by no means invincible."

She said nothing for a few minutes, then voiced another query "What's so special about the Master Chief?"

"Ah, now there's a question. Spartan-117 was always the luckiest of us. Not the strongest, nor the smartest or quickest, but he was a natural-born leader." He coughed "He served in every major battle in the last 30 years in one way or another, and throughout every one he survived. Not all were so fortunate." He lapsed back into silence, wrestling with emotions bubbling to the surface, forcing them down.

"When did you enter the programme?" She asked tentatively.

"2517." He replied quickly

"How many of you were there?"

"33. Including your former commanding officer, Kurt-051."

"And how many are left now?" She asked

He felt a little apprehension sneak into his mind "A handful. Not as many as I'd like."

"Where were you born?"

That struck home. Before his conscription into the programme at age 6, Jake had very few memories of his old life. Flashes of his past would appear sometimes during his downtime, pictures of urban sprawls and snow-covered streets. "Tribute." He replied, neutral in tone.

"Thank you, sir." She said, and fell into silence. Apparently the topic was finished, although he felt raw, exposed. He cleared his mind quickly, as the navigation point on his HUD came within 500 metres of him, changing colour from blue to orange.

"Into cover, column formation, single file." He ordered, and they sidled over from the flattened pathway into the forest on one side, beginning to walk parallel to the clear strip approximately 20 metres into the treeline. The satellite imagery showed a sprawling Covenant complex, at least as long as the now-absent Battlecruiser; the graceful spires of lookout towers and the low curved buildings slowly came into view through the trees, and they halted in the treeline before the customary strip of barren ground between the perimeter wall and the forest. This base was easily twice as large as the Excavation site, and blue vapour spouted from several large chimney-like protrusions from the roofs of some of the grander building.

Jake scanned over the base, and didn't like what he saw; snipers ringed both the defensive walls and the watchtowers, Jackals armed with high-powered Beam Rifle energy weapons, and Plasma Cannon turrets manned by Grunts were strategically place all along the walls so as to give overlapping fields of fire all around the base. Add in the heavy air presence in the area consisting of multiple flights of Banshees and Phantoms, the height of the fortifications and the suspicious silhouettes of Wraith mortar-tanks within the base, and you had one hell of a challenge.

"Tighter than a Firenzian's wallet." Whispered Rachel.

"No way are we getting in there, just look at the defensive forces. This is double any normal base's security." Sabina sounded matter-of-fact "They must be guarding a huge asset."

"That's the idea" Jake confirmed, hailing the _Hydra _on his radio.

"UNSC _Hydra, _this is Sierra-209, do you read?"

"Affirmative Sierra-209, we read you, go for _Hydra_." Came a woman's calm reply.

"Security at Covenant Base Alpha is tougher than anticipated, request support, over."

"Roger that, patching you through to the Captain." The ID on the HUD flickered and was replaced by Captain Hall's information.

"Hall here" He sounded cool and calm, his voice gravelly

"Captain, enemy installation is highly fortified, we could use a little assistance in opening the doors, but the Control Room is directly underneath the base, so MAC rounds are inadvisable."

There was a brief pause, then Hall came back "Well, the 405th are getting restless, I'm sure they'd love to knock on some doors, sit tight. Hall out."

Hall

"Sir, Helljumpers are ready to deploy, tubes are warmed." Athena said "They've already performed the pre-mission pseudo-homoerotic rituals, lots of chest bumping and back-slapping." She smiled a tad. "And Major Kovic has taken the liberty of readying all Marine forces for the assault." The list of troops and vehicles being prepared scrolled across the screen, as well as the ships they were to be launched from.

"That should certainly open a few doors." The captain remarked. "Is there any word from the Shipmaster?" They had sent a message 20 minutes prior, offering assistance to the 4th Fleet of Retribution in their conflict with the remaining Loyalist forces, in which the former was significantly out-gunned.

"No sir, but their fleet is taking a beating; at least three of their vessels have been neutralised, and the CRS-class Sanctified Dawn has taken moderate damage, the CCS cruiser is just too big a mouthful for our Separatist friends."

"Keep me posted." He muttered, rubbing his eyes. "Launch the Marines, deactivate the mines in their path, and then get ready to intervene in this brawl down below, with or without the Shipmaster's permission. It won't look good if we just sit by and let them get pummelled into the dirt."

"Aye, sir, ODS'Ts launching, dropships away."

He watched out of the main view-screen as tiny black specks flew away from the ships in his group toward the planet below, each one a HEV insertion pod, and observed the comparatively bulky forms of Pelicans exiting the various hangars and bays, accelerating quickly away from the taskforce.

"Sir, incoming narrow-band transmission from the Sanctified Dawn, allowing us to assist the 4th fleet in any capacity, how nice of them" Athena read, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "Admiral Marden's taskforce is engaging in runaway forces on the edge of the system, so it looks like we're the cavalry in this particular charge."

"Good." Hall said, grinning slightly "Athena, identify and highlight hostile and friendly units, prepare all weapons systems and takes us down into the fray." He looked around at his bridge crew "Once more unto the breach, everyone, let's give them hell."

10. Chapter 10: Reinforcements

****Cro 'Cylen****

"Status report?" Cro barked, standing up from his command chair as bright purple status lights flashed around him.

"Shipmaster, plasma torpedo launchers 1 through 5 are out of commission, hull integrity at 85%, atmosphere venting from the hangar bay." Came the response

"Damn that Cruiser." He growled, clenching his four fingers into a fist "Concentrate all the Fleet's firepower on the Prophet, target the engines so that we may board her."

"Yes, Shipmaster."

"Shipmaster, plasma salvo incoming, taking evasive manoeuvres!" shouted the Pilot, and the ship lurched drunkenly, throwing them all off balance. Cro watched on the display as the tiny blue-white globules closed in on their underbelly, splashing over the shimmering shield briefly, before they flickered and died. The third and final projectile impacted on the bare hull, causing an explosive decompression in the lower decks, violently jerking the ship and setting off multiple alert klaxons in the command centre.

Cro was thrown bodily side-wards, and hit his skull hard on a display; lights danced before his eyes, and he shook his head groggily as two of his crew dragged a third off of the bridge; the limp body of the injured warrior filled him with fresh anger, and he jumped to his feet.

"Fire all torpedoes, and power up the Energy Projector." He ordered.

As soon as his fleet had entered under the Human minefield around the planet, known as Larris to the Sangheili, the enemy had risen to meet them. Initially, their odds seemed fair; their fleet was larger than the Loyalists', and the enemy had been humiliated when one of their Corvettes was destroyed by a Human nuclear weapon before it even entered combat. But as the two fleets engaged, it became increasingly obvious that this was to be a hard-fought battle. The CCS-class Battlecruiser, Enlightened Prophet, had used its larger number of plasma batteries and its two Energy Projector weapons to devastating effect, and a third of the 4th Fleet's ships were reduced to ionised metal within minutes.

"Sir, the Humans are changing their orbit, moving to engage the enemy" called one officer, spitting blood from a gash above his eye out of his mouth as he spoke "Multiple small contacts behind their ships suggest deployment of ground forces."

"Good, when the Humans come within range, instruct them to focus their attention on the escort; we will take that blasted cruiser if it kills me." He growled. "Fire plasma to lower their shields, and then use the Projector to cut right through their hull. I want the engines and power systems offline, but take heed, we do not wish to destroy her."

"By your will, Shipmaster. The destroyer Exodus has been disabled by one of our frigates, and their corvette escort is no more."

He chuckled "Good, just the frigates and destroyer left then, let us see how these humans fare against them. Alert our ground forces to the Human presence on the surface." He gripped the arms of his command chair tightly as his vessel accelerated, powering towards the behemoth cruiser. "Fire plasma!" He commanded, and the entire Fleet launched a volley of superheated blue plasma, which curled and soared through space towards the hulking form of the battlecruiser, trailing a thin blue line behind them. As soon as the volley was away, the Separatist destroyers, frigates and corvettes engaged what little remained of the Loyalist escort. Cro looked at the tactical display, seeing contact light of his ships flicker out of existence as the Prophet span along its axis and fired its energy projectors, thin, brilliant-white beams erupting from them and shooting across the

void. They targeted the destroyer Piety and the frigate Crusader. The shields of both vessels failed under the immensely powerful energy weapons, and their hulls disintegrated. After the holy light had faded, the front half of the Piety began its tumble down into the atmosphere below. Nothing was left of the Crusader.

"Shipmaster, plasma impact in 5 cycles" reported the weapons officer.

The entire bridge crew looked at the display as the dozens of plasma rounds impacted on the shields, engulfing the prow of the cruiser in roiling blue clouds. After a tense second, the silvery energy barrier flickered and faded.

"Energy Projector ready."

"Disable her, now." He ordered, leaning forward in anticipation. The weapons officer confirmed the strike, and the entire ship seemed to vibrate and hum, resonating with the massive energy weapon's charging cycle. Another brilliant white beam erupted from the front of their ship, piercing the enemy cruiser's hull like a hot knife through butter. The precise beam cut through layers of armour plating and critically damaged the Prophet's engines, leaving it stranded in low orbit, easy pickings for boarding.

"Excellent!" Roared the Shipmaster "Now, prepare boarding parties, and disable her weapons with another strike. Instruct the rest of the fleet to lead the enemy escort away from the Prophet, towards the humans."

"Transmitting orders now."

Cro watched the display as his remaining ships engaged the enemy, bright blue plasma projectiles and blazing red laser fire criss-crossing space, accompanied by the bright silvery flickering of energy shields draining under the onslaught. Tiny single fighters, Seraphs and Banshees ducked and weaved around in the gaps between the capital ships, firing tiny beads of plasma at each other, dodging the torpedoes and fire from other fighters deftly. The entire mass of hulls and plasma slowly drifted away from the two cruisers, the enemy escort too busy defending themselves to defend their flagship.

"Disable her weapons" He barked, and the control room vibrated heavily again as their Energy Projector charged up, and another, final lance of pure white energy struck the Prophet in her midsection, carving through her hull and destroying her fire control systems with the practised precision of a surgeon's scalpel. Atmosphere vented from the glowing hole in her underside as she drifted helplessly in orbit. The shipmaster knew that if any Huragok were on board, they could repair the enemy's systems relatively quickly; they needed to board her and take control before they could.

"Bring us alongside her, prepare boarding parties, and take the Prophet back from these traitorous fools." He gnashed his jaws in menace to a few approving roars from his bridge.

"Shipmaster, I took the liberty of preparing the boarders several

minutes ago, they only wait for us to be within range." Boasted a young Minor called Thral 'Maluuk. This eager soldier had rapidly risen up the ranks ever since he was assigned to the 4th fleet several months ago, and Cro could see him as a Shipmaster himself one day. He endeavoured to be ready for every eventuality, a feature most desirable in an officer.

"Excellent, launch boarders as soon as we are in position, cover them with the close support lasers." He snorted contentedly, elated at the prospect of capturing an intact CCS cruiser. They slowly and carefully drew alongside the massive ship, which dwarfed their own CRS class light cruiser at almost 6 times their length. There was a dull thud as umbilical tubes extended all along the _Sanctified Dawn_, latching onto the hull of the enemy vessel, the plasma cutters built into the tips of the long clear tubes boring into the metal. As soon as the umbilicals had secured an airtight seal, the boarders rushed quickly across the 30 metre gap and into the enemy vessel.

Cro watched events unfold on displays, watched the 100 Special Operations Sangheili battle their way through the enemy ship, meeting stiff resistance at all turns. His hand twitched, wanting to grab a rifle and join his men, but he knew that they could get the job done.

"As soon as they reach the control centre, alert me" he growled, turning his attention to another display, something interesting was happening in the rest of the battle.

****Hall****

"Brace for impact!" Hall declared as the _Hydra_ rolled and weaved, attempting to outmanoeuvre the plasma torpedoes launched from one of the two remaining Loyalist Destroyers. One missile managed to find its mark, splashing over the armour plating by the engines, melting through half of the destroyer's two-metre thick Titanium-A layer in seconds. The entire ship rocked as explosive decompressions occurred, and the Captain barely managed to stay on his feet.

"MACs online sir, ready for round two." Athena said calmly as status reports rolled in from the damaged sectors.

The UNSC battle group had intercepted the mixture of Loyalist and Separatist vessels above the equator of Sigmus IV, and immediately two Corvettes and the frigate _Phoenix_ had been lost to plasma, and their charred broken hulls now lay far behind them, along with the hospital ship _Nightingale_, which scoured the wreckage for survivors. The rest of the ships were heavily engaged with the Loyalist forces, plasma and missile trails criss-crossing space. To complicate things, there was also the large Separatist fleet also attacking the enemy.

"Give me targeting solutions for that damned destroyer" growled Hall. Their first salvo of Mac rounds had just about drained the enemy ship's shields, and their subsequent barrage of missiles had pounded on the exposed hull of the vessel, but it resolutely fought on, venting atmosphere and firing plasma.

"Aye, sir, MAC guns charged, andâ€¦ firing" She said. The lights flickered on the bridge as the UNSC _Hydra_'s dual MAC guns fired

their massive rounds towards the destroyer. The first gun's shot punched a hole clean through the ship, gutting her interior and blasting a sizeable hole through her stern. The second finished the job, slamming into her midsection and destroying the control centre at her heart. The massive kinetic energy of the two shots pushed the remnants into a terminal descent, and red hot lines began to form around the jagged edges of the ship's wounds as she fell into the atmosphere.

Before any celebration could begin, Athena's voice cut through the noise. "Sir, the Chimera has been hit, looks like she took a salvo to her engines, and the enemy is lining up for another shot sir!"

Hall looked on aghast at their sister-ship, a ragged gash cut into the side of the sleek hull, edges glowing. Most of the main engine was missing, only the dim lights of the auxiliaries shone in the darkness. Then he saw the bat-like shape of the other Loyalist CPV-class heavy destroyer bearing down upon the crippled UNSC ship, plasma lines glowing angrily. Instantly he reacted, rapidly typing in commands into his console.

"Sir, I really don't think that's wise" Warned the AI as the full concept of the Captain's proposed move dawned on her.

"It's not about wisdom" He muttered "it's about survival. Evacuate all compartments on the port side, transfer ordinance from port turrets into the magazine or the starboard systems, now."

As the enemy destroyer readied the killing blow, the Hydra leapt forward, racing to the side of the crippled Chimera.

"Tell Captain Akintola to ready his MAC, see what that destroyer has to say to our combined firepower." He ordered as the ship generated extreme G-forces, accelerating rapidly.

The enemy destroyer fired, blue arcs of plasma slowly moving towards the Chimera, a sitting duck. Hall fought against the acceleration as he activated the emergency brakes, a series of chemical-filled modules on the front of the vessel which ignited, shooting jets of flame forward and slowing the ship to a halt. The equally extreme deceleration caused several officers on the bridge to slump in their chairs, unconscious as the blood rushed to their heads. They now lay between the crippled destroyer and the deadly blue plasma, shielding their sister ship with their own bulk.

"All hands, brace, brace, brace!" He yelled as the plasma struck their port side, eating through the plating and heating the ship's superstructure. More explosive decompressions shuddered through the decks, although no crew were in the struck areas. Warning lights and klaxons flashed and blared, but the superstructure held, and they still had weapons control and propulsion.

"Athena" Rasped Hall, having hit his head on the console during the deceleration "Co-ordinate fire with the Chimera, fire staggered salvos of Mac rounds, first ours, then theirs. And launch Archer Missile pods A1 through A10, we're not taking any chances."

"Aye sir, positioning now."

The pair of damaged destroyers swung round, the _Chimera_ having significantly more difficulty in doing so. When the two vessels were aligned, they let loose a devastating barrage of hypersonic ferrous MAC rounds, as well as more than fifty ARCHER missiles between them. The _Hydra_'s slugs impacted on the enemy shields, followed closely by the two projectiles from the _Chimera_, which drained the silvery shields completely, leaving the hull exposed to the volley of missiles which rained down upon it. The enemy destroyer disappeared behind a sea of detonations, and was no more.

"Sir, incoming transmission from the _Chimera_, Captain Akintola says he owes you a drink." Athena said, smirking.

"Let's hope I live long enough to hold him to that." Hall responded, sighing heavily. "Alright people, we've still got the rest of the fleet to mop up, let's go."

The dazed bridge crew returned to their consoles, shaking their heads and grinning. The _Hydra_ broke off from its sister ship and re-joined the fight, quickly dispatching two light frigates with the assistance of the Separatist destroyer _Penance_. It still felt alien to be fighting alongside the organically shaped, bulbous warships, but Hall was grateful for the impressive firepower the Separatist vessels brought to the table.

"Sir, the _Marie-Antoinette_ is hailing us, alerting us to a group of damaged Loyalist warships disengaging and heading towards the _Sanctified Dawn_." Reported Lieutenant Mallard, pushing her broken glasses up her nose.

"Harrison, fire SHIVAs as soon as they're clear of the 4th fleet's ships, and alert the _Dawn_." Hall commanded.

"Aye sir, SHIVAs away." Confirmed the weapons officer

Four bright white trails of vapour streaked away from the destroyer, joined quickly by three more from the _Chimera_'s launchers. The trio of enemy vessels, frigate-class, slipped away from the melee, vaporising a Separatist corvette in one co-ordinated attack. They were chased by the seven SHIVA nuclear missiles, which closed the gap within seconds, each missile impacting on a different point on their target vessel. The ships were engulfed in multiple nuclear explosions; all that remained were drifting pieces of hull, warped and twisted by the heat of the nuclear fireballs.

"Next target" Hall said, wiping a single bead of sweat trailing down his forehead "Fire!"

Lance Corporal Sarah "Hawk" Hawkins, 405**th**** Shock Troopers**

"Hey, get your head straight Marine" She yelled over the roar of the engines, jamming the Jarhead's helmet back onto his skull. The idiot had been too busy hitting on her to focus on securing his strapping, and as soon as their D77H-PCI Pelican drop ship had hit the atmosphere, she had looked on in amusement as the lanky Private had been bodily slammed into the roof of the crew bay, dislodging his helmet.

"Landfall, T minus 5." Came the pilot's voice over the comms.

She looked around the packed ship through her full-face visor; two rows of stony-faced Marines faced each other across a 2 metre gap, each man breathing deeply and heavily to counteract the symptoms of the concurrent acceleration and deceleration their ship had been subjected to as it fell from orbit into the atmosphere of Sigmus IV. Normally, Sarah would already be breaking through the cloud layer in a single-seat HEV entry pod, firing her retro-rockets and springing out of the metal coffin into a hail of enemy fire. But not today.

Much to her annoyance, the QM on the Hydra had informed her in his own dreary tones that her pod, along with three others, had been prioritised. She would have to hitch a ride to the surface on board a Pelican, with the regular infantry.

She looked across the crew bay to the opposite seat and saw her squad-mate, PFC Ramirez. He was as conspicuous as she was in matte-black vacuum-proof ODS armour, contrasting with the drab olive combat armour of the Marine next to him. He twisted his head to observe the state of the troops, then shrugged almost imperceptibly, inspecting his MA5C Assault Rifle. She checked her own rifle, polishing off a speck of dust from the barrel, grateful for the one-way reflective visor incorporated into her full-face helmet. She didn't want anyone to see how terrified she felt.

The shakiness of the Pelican's descent lessened, and the pilot's voice came over the comms again

"Hey, Helljumpers, LZ's looking a little hot, could use some help on the guns."

Ramirez looked towards her, his own reflective visor giving nothing away, although she knew he was grinning like a child behind the composite plastic. She nodded at him, before pushing the quick release of her harness and standing.

"Affirmative, soften them up with the chin gun, we'll pick off the stragglers." She knew that the powerful nose-mounted gun at the front of the drop-ship could rip through a covenant Phantom's skin easily enough. She climbed over the marines' limbs towards the front of the bay, where she opened the side hatch, letting in a bitterly cold wind and adding another layer of noise to the compartment. She looked over her shoulder to see Ramirez doing the same on the right hand side of the ship, and settled herself behind the controls of the M410 mounted machine gun, strapping herself into the harness before closing the hatch behind her.

She now hung on a short arm protruding from the left hand side of the bulky Pelican, and as her arms naturally settled on the firing and aiming mechanism, her HUD synchronised with the electronics in the turret, displaying a large reticule where the weapon was pointing, as well as showing ammo count and barrel heat.

"Hey, Hawkins, this thing is loco," exclaimed Ramirez over the comms, sounding like a kid in a candy store. "Betcha I get more kills with this diablo than you do."

She grinned "You're on" She pulled the arming mechanism back on the gun with a satisfyingly mechanical clunk, and swivelled round on her

seat, testing the gun's range of motion.

"We're dropping altitude, gonna come up over the mountain range to the west of the target, drop down the other side and into the crater." The pilot informed them, and now Sarah could see other Pelican drop-ships dropping down beside them, at least a dozen of them, in a loose "V" formation, soaring over the mountain peaks.

"We're 10 clicks out, get ready."

The formation broke apart as they neared their target, the large covenant base at the centre of the massive horseshoe shaped crater. Even from 10 kilometres away, she could see the purple, curved structures, clustered around a tall building in the centre, which looked like some kind of dock, as a large umbilical tube still stretched 100 metre into the sky. Around the complex was a 5 metre high defensive wall, circling around the buildings and broken by regular placement of raised sniper towers, and one main gate at the northern end of the base.

Their LZ was in front of this gate, in a clearing in the forest 100 metres away from the walls. As they flew over the facility, the chin gun opened fire, firing its 50mm projectiles at supersonic speeds towards the battlements. She couldn't see where the rounds fell, but she knew they would decimate anything they did hit. She heard the chattering of Ramirez' gun, and pulled the trigger, aiming for a group of Jackals in a sniper tower as they whizzed past. She sprayed a good few bursts of automatic fire from her 50 Cal weapon in the snipers' general direction, and they skimmed past the tower before she could see what effect if any she had had.

The chin of the drop-ship suddenly lifted up as the pilot bled speed, decelerating hard above the forest canopy, hovering just above the treetops. The ship swung around and began to slowly descend into the clearing, and Sarah ceased the moment, aiming at the defending aliens on the battlements and squeezing the trigger. She saw Elites' shields pop and fail, blood fly through the air, Jackal shield gauntlets overload, and Grunt methane tanks explode, sending their owners' body parts flying.

It was only now that she noticed muzzle flashes in the trees, and saw enemies she wasn't shooting at fall. So, the ODSTs that had been deployed ahead of the main assault force had made it.

She instinctively ducked in her seat as a plasma bolt soared towards her and hit the bulkhead above her head, leaving the metal glowing and blackened. Damn, that was close. She relented the firing as they dropped below the treeline, and unbuckled herself from the turret, preparing to jump off of the drop-ship as soon as they touched down.

Her comms were already alive with orders and status reports, and from what she was hearing, the covenant really hadn't expected a full assault on their main base; the defenders were in disarray, and the Major was very adamant in taking full advantage of this fact.

As soon as she felt the drop-ship's ramp mechanism whirr into action, she dropped from her position onto the loose soil beneath, rushing around to the lowering ramp and the two lines of Marines standing up

ready to disembark.

"Alright Marines, let's go, the Corps ain't paying us by the hour!" yelled a tough-looking sergeant, and the soldiers whooped and punched the air as they sprinted out of the bay, through the forest towards the loudening sound of rifle and plasma fire. As soon as the last private had marched off into the forest, she ducked into the hold and grabbed her rifle, snapping it onto the holster on her back, and then grabbing her prized M319 Grenade Launcher from under her seat, sliding one 40mm round into the chamber before snapping the weapon together, grinning.

"Alright, Ramirez, let's find Captain De Santa" She said, turning around to see Ramirez already shouldering his rifle

"Roger that Hawkins" He responded, she could tell he was grinning again "By the way, I think you owe me a drink, LC. I counted 13 kills"

"Hell Private, I'll buy you a crate when we get back" She said, rolling her eyes and snorting. "Let's move out."

"I'm on your six LC."

She set off at a steady pace towards the objective, weaving in between closely packed deciduous trees, rising and falling with the rugged terrain. Her ankles were going to hurt like hell in about three hours. The Private stuck to her heels, whistling something she vaguely recognised as the theme tune to the popular drama Undercover, and as they vaulted over fallen tree trunks she saw the break in the forest in front of her, and the large collection of ODSs crouching behind thick trunks and lying in shallow ditches. The ground and trees surrounding them was scarred and blackened with plasma burns, and littered with spent bullet casings.

As they approached, one of the black-suited soldiers looked around at them, the two silver bars painted onto his helmet denoting him as Captain Michael De Santa. A second later, Hawkins' HUD assigned an icon to the Captain's form, showing rank, name etc, and her and Ramirez dove into cover next to him and about 20 other troops, all of whom were trading fire with enemies on the ramparts.

"Hawkins, Ramirez, glad you could join the party." The Captain said, popping up from behind cover to fire a few rounds from his Battle Rifle. Hawkins saw a Jackal fall from one of the nearest sniper towers, and the captain fell back behind the fallen tree, rolling his shoulder. "Those snipers are killing us out here. We were almost into the compound, then they came down hard on us with Banshee fliers and mortars. Been pinned down by those god-damn Jackals ever since. Lost about an eighth of the company on impact, Lieutenant Willis has the rest of us on the southern side. Let's hope he's having more luck."

"Sir, where are our snipers?" Hawkins asked, taking in the tactical situation in the blink of an eye.

"Hell if I know, lost contact during re-entry." Muttered De Santa, shaking his head.

Suddenly, the sharp crack of a sniper rifle echoed around them, and

Hawkins poked her head up from the trunk to see a pair of Jackal sharpshooters tumble from on high, purple blood spouting from what was once their heads, needle rifles still clutched in twitching, claw-like hands.

"Well, one of them must be up." She commented wryly

"Well I'll be damned" he whispered, broadcasting on all UNSC channels "UNSC shooter, respond, is that you Phillips?"

The radio filled with static, but the steady rapport of heavy calibre rifle fire continued, downing target after target, clearing the sniper towers within 60 seconds, leaving only those enemies on the wall ramparts still firing.

"UNSC shooter, respond" barked the captain, impatient.

No response came, and no more rifle fire came "Whoever that was, I'm gonna find him after this and shove my boot up his ass for the whole "Ghillie in the Mist" act." De Santa growled. "ODSTs, second squad, suppress those hinge-heads, Miller, Ryan, Ramirez, Hawkins, Caparzo and first squad, you're on me, get ready to move fast. We're gonna run right up to the wall, into the perfect defilade. Who's got the C12?"

"I do, sir." Called a private from behind a tree trunk

"Toss it here, Jackson." De Santa said, catching the satchel brimming with high explosive. "Hawkins, you're the fastest runner here, take it." He held out the bag to her, and she took it, slinging it around her shoulder.

"Alright, we all set to go?" He asked, turning to the dozen troops lined up behind him, ready to charge. "Last one to the wall buys first round."

Hawkins took deep breaths, tightening the satchel around her and sliding the action of her rifle back, loading the first round into the chamber. "Ready."

****Jacob****

"Good shooting Jo." Jacob said from their position high up in a tree. He and Josef had ascended a thick-trunked specimen 20 minutes prior to the ODSTs' arrival, and had excellent views of the insertion pods as they broke through the cloud layer and slammed into the earth.

When the ODSTs had been pushed back by covenant air support, Jacob had taken the role of spotter as the younger Spartan had expertly slotted a dozen enemy snipers, resting his rifle on a branch. When the hail came in from the ODST's CO, Jacob and Josef had been slowly descending the tree. Sticking to ONI Standard Operating Procedures, they had ignored the hails, no sense in compromising operational security any more than necessary.

"Sab, Rachel, the cavalry's here, with a little help." Jacob said. He and Josef had spotted a larger force of Marines grouping a little further into the trees than the ODSTs, at least four company's worth, plus half a dozen Warthogs and a Scorpion MBT. With one group of

ODSTs from the North, the other from the East, and the Marines readying for an assault from the West, this base wasn't going to be here for much longer.

"What's the plan sir?" Asked Rachel as he hit the floor. She was crouched next to the trunk of the tree, rifle pointed down at the ground.

"The central spire is sitting right above the control centre, so we need to get in there. You'll be happy to know that stealth is no longer a priority. We're closest to a group of ODSTs, who, if their radio chatter is any indication, is going to blow the Eastern wall well before the Marines get organised. We could tag along with them, go in guns blazing, and hope that there's not a whole lance of Sangheili waiting for us with swords drawn." He looked around at the others, Josef was nodding slowly "Or, we try and climb the Southern wall while the hinge-heads are busy with the others, make a beeline to the control centre, silently as possible. So, which one is it going to be?"

Sabina swung her shotgun around absent-mindedly "I'm all for the frontal assault, they already know we're here, so stealth isn't going to last long, the whole covenant is looking for 'demons'. Plus, if we go for stealth, our offensive capabilities are relatively limited."

Josef nodded, stowing his sniper rifle on his back "I'm with her, sir. We go in, hard and fast, with the ODSTs. We give them an entrance, then split off and head for the control room. The Marines will back them up."

Rachel looked up from her position "Sir, I can see the potential of a silent strike, but it does seem to be an exercise in futility. Plus, those troopers could use all the help they can get."

Jacob nodded. "Good. Ready up, we'll scout around the treeline and say hello to our UNSC brethren."

Less than 60 seconds later, the four Spartans were silently and slowly approaching the group of ODSTs crouching behind various fallen and upright trees. All of their black helmets were angled towards one soldier, a Captain judging by his insignia, and the trooper next to him had an olive green satchel slung across their shoulder.

"Alright, activating IFF tags now." Jacob said, and suddenly the whole company turned to face their direction, weapons raised. They couldn't see the Spartans yet, but the bright yellow blips on the motion sensors displayed clearly their presence. The UNSC E-band lit up with unfamiliar voices;

"Where are they?"

"I got no shot"

"Invisible _diablos_"

"UNSC personnel coming out, hold your fire." Jacob stated calmly on the open channel, and motioned to the others to holster their weapons. As one, the four armoured warrior slowly stepped out from

the shadows, hands by their sides.

"Mierda!"

"Spartans?"

"Jesus H. Christ"

All the troopers recoiled slightly, shocked by the presence of the tall warriors, rifles lowered, helmeted heads tilted and the captain depolarised his visor, looking equal parts shocked and delighted.

"Well, I'll be damned, four god-damn Spartans. Which of you is the CO?" He asked, gruff and to-the-point

Jacob stepped forward "That would be me, Captain De Santa, Chief Petty Officer Jacob-209" he said, reading off of his HUD. "Now, shall we do something about this big ugly covenant base over there?"

De Santa grinned, and Jacob thought that if the man could've, he would've started smoking a Sweet William cigar popular with all officers. "I thought you'd never ask Spartan."

11. Chapter 11: Insertion

****Cro 'Cylen ****

"Shipmaster, the humans are engaging the enemy alongside our fleet escort, their ranks have broken, sending all ships to pursue and destroy" barked the intelligence officer, tapping in instructions into the holographic display in front of him.

"Good, what's the progress on the boarding party?" he demanded. Their vessel, the CRS-class light cruiser, the _Sanctified Dawn_ was in a vulnerable position, anchored to the much larger CCS-class _Enlightened Prophet_ by dozens of umbilical tubes, down which hundreds of special operations Sangheili had entered the crippled enemy ship with the intention of seizing control of the valuable warship.

"They are moving through the engineering decks, meeting heavy resistance, I have sent medical teams in behind them." The last part of the sentence stuck a little in the officer's throat. Up until very recently, it had been seen as a great dishonour for a Sangheili warrior to accept medical aid. As the Arbiter had put it, the humans had a phrase 'It is better to live to live to fight another day than to die needlessly'. He had to admit, it made sense from a tactical point of view, to preserve as many soldiers as possible to raise your own numbers in the next engagement. However, according to another human idiom, old habits die hard, and many of the older warriors were still resistant to the concept.

"Tell them to hurry, I do not like being so vulnerable. If the enemy fleet regains its coordination, we will be easy to strike and destroy." He barked, clenching the arm of his chair again.

"By your will, shipmaster" the officer confirmed, and Cro noticed the beacons of his boarding party speed up slightly, advancing through

compartments and passages, towards the central control room. Cro tuned his helmet to the boarding party's communications, and listened in on them.

"Moving into next compartment, grenade out!"

"Get in there, leave nothing standing"

"Enemy spotted, firing! Behind the pillar"

"He's down, move up"

It had been a few years since Cro had fought in any hand-to-hand engagement, but listening to the voices of these warriors, the tones of half cool determination and half sheer terror, brought back memories of battle. He became so transfixed by their actions, he didn't notice that one unit had reached the doors to the control centre until they had set an antimatter charge on the smooth grey surface.

"Charge set."

"Detonating"

"Clear the room, go."

"Taking fire"

"I'm hit"

"Target by the console"

Against his will, the Shipmaster was getting excited, concerned both for his men and the safety of the ship they were seizing. The communications network went silent for a few seconds, and Cro could feel his hearts pumping in his chest. Then, a faint message came through:

"Shipmaster, we've taken the control centre, locking all doors. We hold the armoury and engineering, awaiting instructions." The voice sounded young, and panicked.

"Casualties?"

"Of the 12 of us that entered, I am the only survivor. Their commander was a Zealot. He fought until the breath was crushed from him."

"Fine fighting warrior. Make sure all compartment doors are at maximum security lock, then broadcast my channel throughout the ship." Cro growled, internally ecstatic. He would give these traitors one last chance to surrender, after which there would be no mercy.

"Attention the crew of the Enlightened Prophet. This is Shipmaster Cro 'Cylen of the 4th Fleet of Retribution. We have captured the command centre of your vessel, we control the armoury and we control power. 10 minutes after I finish talking to you, I will order my forces to clear out each and every section of the ship. If you lay down your arms and do not hinder us, you can go back to your keeps

and families unharmed. If you do not, we will be forced to kill every single aggressor. You don't have to die for a leader who has misled you and lied to you every step of the way. Sangheilios needs every one of you to help rebuild us to the mighty empire we can be." He turned off his communicator and looked around at the control centre of his ship; every Sangheili looked at him, some approvingly, some indifferent, and a few in awe.

"Now, let us see how loyal they really are." Cro muttered as the bridge returned to normal, and they began the seemingly glacial wait until the fate of the _Prophet_'s crew was decided.

****Lance Corporal Sarah 'Hawk' Hawkins****

Jesus Christ they're tall she thought as she stared up into the golden visor of what she had thought was an unusual Elite combat harness, until she realised that the knees of this massive figure bent the right way. Her adrenaline-addled mind had only associated the angular body armour with the Spartans as the leader stepped out from the shadows, rifle stowed.

There were four of them, all clad in slightly different variants of that imposing armour. The leader was now conferring with Captain De Santa, projecting SATCOM imagery into the space between them, highlighting certain buildings and structures. The other three had taken cover, moving impossibly quickly, the only indication of their massive weight was their deep footsteps in the ground.

She was now crouched right next to one of them, the one with matte-grey armour. What did she say to a 7 foot tall warrior? How did they get here? They didn't detect any UNSC tags on the way down in their dropship, so either these Spartans had a stealth ship, orâ€|

>The penny dropped. Or they had dropped in HEV pods, her squad's HEV pods, which would explain why her pod had been 'prioritised', and why she had had to slum it with the Marines in a Pelican.<p>

"Hey Spartan, you stole my ride."

The reflective visor turned to face her, but no response came from the giant figure, and they just turned around to face the Captain. What had she been expecting? The Spartans were legendary warriors, not conversationalists, but still, this one's lack of voice certainly added to the rumours she'd heard that under all that armour they were just machines. She looked back at Ramirez, and he shrugged, making his shoulder plates clank slightly; so he had no idea as to the enigmatic soldier either.

Captain De Santa looked up from the holographic maps, broadcasting on TeamCom; "Listen up, the plan is as follows; Spartan-209 here and his Fireteam will run along the right flank and draw enemy fire, I've been told they are better at absorbing plasma than the standard BDU." That drew a chuckle from a couple of the platoon. "While they draw their attention and provide fire support, the running group will make a break for the wall while the rest of you maintain fire superiority on those defences. As far as we know, the covvies have little to no air support, but I want that M41 ready in the treeline as a contingency. The runners and I will reach the base of the wall, plant the det charges, and blow a hole. As soon as I give the signal, I want the support to run straight to us. The Spartans will maintain

suppressive fire and then spearhead the intrusion into the base when we're all in position on either side of the hole, any questions? Good" He looked over into the forest in the general direction of the Marine force. "I should also let you know that the Marine battalion is also planning to attack the gates of the compound, but they aren't Helljumpers, so if I see one Jarhead within those walls before every last one of you is in there kicking ass, I'm gonna shoot you myself."

No one argued with him, and in less than 30 seconds, everyone was in their positions. The Captain looked behind him, at his runners, and then looked to his left. Hawkins imagined that he was weighing up his odds of survival, but like all good Cos, and all Helljumpers, he discarded his mortality and gave the signal.

"Suppressing fire!" De Santa yelled, and dozens of ODSTs popped up or around from cover and fired, peppering the fortifications with lead. On cue, the four massive Spartans shot out from the treeline impossibly fast, kicking up turf. They sprinted parallel to the tall walls, firing their weapons as they sprinted.

"Runners, on me!" he yelled again, and jumped out from behind the tree trunk and began running towards the imposing purple walls, the rest of them joined him, and Hawkins pushed away from a branch and tore after him, the explosive-filled satchel bouncing on her back as she pounded away at the ground. Her heart beat a staccato in her chest, and her breathing came hard and fast as she pumped her legs; the monolithic wall grew larger in her visor, and she spotted bird-like Jackals appear into view, firing what looked like carbine rifles at the approaching soldiers. In the periphery of her vision, she saw one black-suited ODST take a bright green energy round to the chest, and he fell without a word, sliding to the ground. The HUD icon for Private Miller flashed KIA as his vitals flat-lined, and Sarah found herself unable to comprehend the loss, her adrenaline prevented her from doing so. There would be time enough for grieving later, right now she had to get to cover.

She chanced a look up at the Jackals to see them both take rounds to the chest, their bodies writhing, and as purple blood sprayed through the air, the Jackals dropped out of view as she closed in on the wall. She threw herself against the smooth purple metal alongside the rest of the runners, and she ripped off the satchel, throwing two blocks of C12 to Caparzo, who quickly affixed the sticky explosive to the surface, and took the remaining two blocks in her own hands, sticking one block at knee-height and the other at head height, wirelessly linking the detonators embedded in the blocks to Captain De Santa's HUD.

"Detonators read green, everybody clear, making a hole!" He yelled, and they all moved along the wall on either side away from the explosives. Hawkins found herself next to the Captain as he counted down from 5 and clenched his fist, activating the detonators. For a brief moment, the cacophony of gunfire from the support was drowned out in the dull thwump of four 1 kilogram blocks of enriched explosive ripping a hole in the defensive wall. Dust and smoke filled the air, and De Santa turned around to inspect the hole; a perfect 2 by 1 metre ragged hole, the edges of the metal still red-hot.

"We're in business. Helljumpers, move up, Spartans, covering fire!"

"Covering" Came the response from the CPO, his calm British tones seemingly out of place with the chaotic surroundings. She looked over in the Spartans' direction and saw them crouching in the treeline, all of them had their weapons raised and were laying down heavy fire.

The rest of the platoon abandoned their positions and ran towards them, dodging bolts of plasma and crystalline needle rounds. All she could do was look on as five of them were struck, one by a plasma round to the helmet, three were hit by energy weapons, and the last took a dozen needle rounds to the chest. He had enough time to yell the most blood curling scream she'd ever heard in 7 years of service before the mass of crystals super-combined, ripping open his chest and obscuring him in a purple cloud of shards. She looked down, trying not to vomit, and when she looked up again, the eviscerated corpse was thankfully on the floor, face down. Another 5 names changed status to KIA on the HUD.

The surviving ODSs thundered across the space and threw themselves into the defilade next to the wall as the Spartans moved from the treeline, easily moving at 30 mph, they covered the distance in seconds and joined her and the captain by the hole in the wall. They must have been on their own private COM channel, because they moved with such practiced synchronicity they almost flowed like water. However they did it, they were quick.

"Spartans, get in the hole" ordered the captain, and the ceramic-coated soldiers immediately entered the base, firing their weapons as they went. The occasional bolt of plasma or lance of energy spewed from the hole, and the sound of concentrated gunfire issued from the rift, Captain De Santa shook his head and turned to her.

"God damn, these Spartans may be freaks, but they're damn efficient freaks!" He cricked his neck, then shouldered his M7 SMG. "Let's get in there, they're tough but they ain't invincible!"

The ODSs filed into the hole, firing as they entered the base, adding to the symphony of metal, until only Hawkins and Ramirez were left. Ramirez had a blackened smear over his left shoulder pad, but was still as happy as ever.

"Hey LC, you wanna see who can kill more Tangos on the ground? Double or nothing?"

She felt the adrenaline rising again, her vision tunnelling slightly, and squeezed her MA5C tightly. "You're on, and I'm going to win this time."

****Jacob****

"Covering, move up" he said calmly as he took aim and fired upon a trio of Grunts in a doorway, their bodies twitched and fell, and Josef moved up to the next building, leaning his shoulder against the wall. Sabina and Rachel were involved in a similar pattern on the other side of the concourse running along inside the base.

The roadway in question was the widest 'Street' in the base, and ran along the roughly oval shaped facility like a spine, leading to the

centralised command centre. Other walkways branched off of the main road in irregular patterns, but from previous experience, some of the larger buildings had to be infirmaries, mess halls and barracks. At the centre of the complex stood a tall tower, under which the entrance to the Control Centre should be.

The ODS'Ts were right behind them, moving from room to room in each building and clearing out all enemies; they were methodical and brutal, leaving none standing. He heard high pitched screams of terrified Grunts and snarls of enraged Elites, combined with the bursts of automatic fire from the Helljumpers.

Jacob levelled his MA5D and fired, downing a Jackal in an upstairs window quickly. The buildings of the base were a mixture of small, one-storey huts, dominating spires and larger factory or warehouse sized buildings. There were covenant vehicles dotted around the streets, Ghosts, Revenants, even a couple of Wraiths further towards the central tower, and they, along with the walls of buildings became the Spartans' cover.

Initially there had been little resistance once they'd breached the walls, as the enemies inside the walls were not prepared for their defences to fail. Now however, the Elites, Jackals and Grunts they put down were armed and angry.

Jake ducked behind the wall of a storeroom as a barrage of plasma fire from an upstairs window on the girls' side of the street.

"Sab, getting some heat, 2nd floor, your 11 o'clock" He stated, risking a peek at the aliens before pulling his head back sharply as a single plasma bolt struck his head. His energy shields coiled and glowed in front of him, absorbing the energy, and his shield bar drained by 10%.

"Grenade out." Sab said, and Jake saw her pull the pin from a frag grenade, look up at the window for a split second judging the throw, and then toss it in a graceful arc which left the M9 nestled at the feet of an Elite. He waited for three seconds and heard the loud blast, which put an end to the plasma fire.

"Good toss" Commented Josef before firing his sniper rifle into a dark window a hundred metres down the street. The resulting screams signalled that he had found his mark.

"Hold up, wait for the ODS'Ts to catch up." Jake said, and they settled into their covered positions, taking shots at any enemy that dared to break cover. The sounds of gunfire steadily grew closer to them, and it wasn't long before Captain De Santa had caught them up, slumping into cover beside him.

"Spartan, we're stretched thin, running low on ammunition, we need to hold the line with the ground we have until the Marines arrive." He gasped, and Jake noticed that his battle armour was blackened and charred in several places.

"Not an option Captain, I have my orders." Jake calmly asserted "We need to get to the centre, but you have a good chance of being able to hold the Eastern sector of the base, use enemy weapons if need be, there was an armoury by the ingress point, and most of these vehicles are in working order."

The ODSST nodded slowly "We can do that, at least until the Troopers get here. I've got another 40 men moving into the base through our hole, they were the guys stationed north of the base. Add that to the 30 already here, we can do it." He paused, straightening up and nodding again. "Good hunting, Spartans."

"And you, Helljumper." Jake nodded to him as he ran back to his soldiers and began explaining the situation. "Come on Spartans, that Control Centre isn't going to storm itself"

"On you Jay" Sabina confirmed.

"Moving" Jake said, and as one the four soldiers sprang from cover and advanced at a jog, weapons raised and blazing. They cut through the enemy defenders, tossing grenades into windows, gunning down anything in their path, taking cover behind vehicles when necessary. Enemy shields flared and failed, blood flew through the air, and Josef hummed with delight as round after round from his rifle tore through alien bone and flesh.

In 20 blood-soaked minutes, they had fought to within spitting distance of the Spire, and here was where Covenant resistance was fiercest. They'd had time to organise their ranks, and now close to a hundred aliens had taken up positions in the circular courtyard surrounding the Spire, in doorways, behind walls and in windows, all with a single objective; to kill the demons that had desecrated their homes.

"Now ****that's**** a hell of a lot of covvies" Whistled Rachel, her Australian drawl highlighting her awe.

"We need fire support." Sabina admitted "Got any birds in the area?"

"Let's find out" he said, and broadcast on the E-Band "Any and all UNSC Air assets in the area, this is Sierra 209 requesting priority assistance, anyone copy?"

"Roger that, Sierra 209, Pelican gunship Bravo Kilo 420 here, on station ready to provide Close Air Support." Came the reply.

"Bravo Kilo 420, we need a couple of Anvils dropped in an enclosed space by the central spire. How copy?"

"I see you, looks like you got a bad weed problem, well I so happen to be carrying some of the finest herbicide this side of Harvest" came the response "I'll drop one Anvil on the Western side of the courtyard, any more and that thing's in danger of collapsing on itself. Ordinance in 20."

"Copy that, over and out." Jake ended, turning to the Spartans "Move, back up the street, 20 metres, now."

The four of them easily retreated in the time it took for the Pelican gunship to make its attack run, and had just enough time to turn and watch the bulky craft soar overhead, firing a single missile from the multiple missile pods under each wing. The projectile made a lazy curve away from the gunship, and then its second-stage ignited, sending the explosive warhead shooting down with pinpoint accuracy

into the courtyard.

In the resulting explosion, three small purple buildings collapsed and dozens of aliens were killed by the shockwave. Those that survived were deafened and injured, crawling or simply slumped on the ground. The Spartans advanced cautiously on the area, and upon realising the state of their adversaries, relaxed slightly.

"Police the bodies, put the wounded out of their misery." Jake ordered, and they set to work, pumping a single round into the head of each wounded Elite, Grunt, Jackal and even a couple of Skirmishers. It wasn't pleasant, but it was a damn sight cleaner than their inevitable deaths.

"Form up, we're going in." Jake said, moving towards the doorway of the spire. "Just checking in with the Admiral."

He opened a private Comm channel with the Marie Antoinette "Vice Admiral Yao, Sierra 209 reporting in, commencing intrusion into Control Centre."

"Copy that CPO, I have some developments on the Separatists in orbit, they've captured the Prophet and, with the help of us, have largely defeated the Loyalist forces in orbit. They're landing ground troops all over the crater, including Alpha Base. Their Leader, a Cro 'Cylon is after the Elite who's probably in the control centre, and it would look good for Human-Sanghelios relations if we were to turn him over alive. I repeat, do not kill the Loyalist leader unless absolutely necessary. I'm tracking Separatist Phantoms 10 minutes out from the base and Loyalist armoured reinforcements heading in from outlying bases. It's going to become quite complicated down there soon, I've already briefed the Marines and ODSs, and the Separatists have agreed to emit a faint signal on our IFF channels. It should minimise friendly fire." She sounded flustered, and alarms blared in the background of the transmission.

"Copy that ma'am, we'll find him and hand him over to the Shipmaster, and de-activate the installation." Jake said, wondering what condition the Battle-Group was in. "What happened to the Babylon?"

There was a brief pause "We lost contact with the UNSC Babylon an hour ago. They were chasing remnants from the first naval engagement in-system, and now nothing. As soon as the Loyalists in orbit are dealt with, I'm tasking the Battle-Group to re-establish contact. Best case scenario, their Communications were damaged."

This news made Jake feel deeply uneasy; Marathon-class cruisers didn't just disappear. "Understood, Sierra 209 out."

He turned to the rest of the team "Get ready, we don't know what kind of defences are in play, oh and don't slot the leader, one of the more friendly Hinge-Heads has prior claim."

Josef moaned "Awww, I don't get to shoot him? Can't we just kill him and then slot the friendly one too? The only good Hinge-Head is a dead Hinge-Head."

Rachel punched his shoulder "Shut up, idiot, you can satisfy your bloodlust on the way in."

Sabina just shook her head slightly, but behind her visor Jake knew she was biting her lip, suppressing a smile. These two Spartan-IIIs were rough, but both characters in their own right.

Jake moved into the wide room at the base of the Spire, swinging his rifle around, covering the sightlines. When it became clear that no defence was present, he lowered the weapon and headed towards the centre of the circular room, onto a wide raised pad. He recognised the pedestal in the centre as a covenant control console. At a guess, this was the lift that would take them down into the Forerunner structure. The others followed close behind, and took up firing positions on the pad, facing outwards; he pushed the biggest holographic button on the surface, and the entire pad jerked downwards a little, before smoothly lowering into the floor.

"I'm thinking belly of the beast" Mumbled Rachel, looking around at the smooth stone walls suspiciously.

"More like out of the fire" Muttered Sabina, equally wary.

Jacob reloaded his Assault Rifle and checked the sight: he had a feeling that he was going to need it.

****Hall****

"Vice Admiral, I don't know if we're combat ready" Hall reported over voice comms "We've lost almost half of our Archer launchers, MAC controls are patchy and our engine is now only giving 50% output. The Chimera's in a little better shape, she's got full weapons control but only her auxiliary thrusters."

Vice Admiral Yao sighed down the line "Understood, Captain, but the Babylon has gone dark, and I need to find out where she's gone or if she needs help. I recommend that you use the docking ports on the hulls of both the Hydra and the Chimera to join them together, at least then you have the weapons capability of the latter and your engines."

Hall frowned, conjoined ships generally tended to be slow and under-armed. Ships were primarily designed to operate on their own, and so called 'conjoining' was usually only performed in order to tow a badly damaged vessel to a refit and repair station.

"Aye Admiral, we'll join with the Chimera, we should have cleared MAC controls by then anyway. I'll take all our remaining ships apart from the Wolfgang, Merida and Corbulo." He knew that the trio of heavy frigates wouldn't be much of a defensive force for the troops on the ground, but they could still provide decent fire support and could comfortably accommodate all ground-side personnel in the event of planetary evacuation. "That leaves me with us and the Chimera, the Nightingale, the Heavy frigates Kenway, Kennedy and Kingslayer, the Light frigates Maginot and Marseille, and the corvettes Fool Me Once, Phyllis, and Lone Wolf." He summed up the offensive capabilities, and more importantly the status of these vessels. "We'll assemble the ships and break orbit in an hour, Admiral. Hall out."

He swung down from his chair on the empty bridge; the bridge crew had been close to passing out due to lack of sleep, and as such he had

ordered them to catch a few hours' rest as soon as the last enemy corvette was destroyed. That had been 4 hours ago, and the ship had slumped into a sort of fatigued state, everyone was exhausted after a solid 36 hours of contact.

"Athena, what is the status of the MAC control system?"

The AI's small holographic figure flickered into life on the pedestal "Engineering estimate 3 hours repairs sir, the relays all need replacing, and it's an EVA repair as well, the plasma destroyed almost everything in the compartment. We're quite lucky it didn't melt the relay housing, otherwise the MAC system would be totally inoperable."

Hall grunted, sipping his mug of coffee, grimacing at the bitter taste. "More importantly, when is the tea machine on deck 09B going to be fixed? I like coffee well enough, but this shit is awful." He never normally complained or swore on the bridge, but being all alone in the space had its advantages.

"I'll make a note to Engineering" Athena said, raising one eyebrow. "Are we really going to mount a rescue mission for the _Babylon_, sir? Whatever made her go dark is more than a match for our flotilla."

Hall sighed and leaned against the weapons console, looking up. "It would seem so. She was last seen in orbit around one of the outer planets, Sigmus V. Then, about 2 hours into the engagement, she went dark, as did her escort. No word from them since, so yes, we're going to find out where they are and what happened to them, and mount a rescue mission if need be." He cleared his throat. "But don't be deluded, if we face a much larger enemy force, I'm not intending to sacrifice the lives of everyone on these ships just so that they can die 'honourable' deaths. If we don't stand a chance, we retreat, join up with the defending frigates, evacuate from the planet and jump out system. I don't care if I get court martialled, I won't have the lives of thousands of servicemen on my conscience."

The AI didn't respond for a while, shocked at the honesty of the Captain "Sir, I don't know how to respondâ€¦"

"Then don't. I'm only telling you so that you know how to most efficiently follow my orders later. If half of what they tell me about 5th gen Smart AIs is true, you've already run simulations of these exact events 2000 times." He looked up towards the holographic avatar. "Am I right?"

"3000" She whispered "I've run more than that, but only 3000 in which the enemy force is too great." She nodded "Anyway, Captain, I've already begun communicating with the ships in the fleet, they will be in position in 45 minutes, and the service droids from us and the _Chimera_ have already begun the joining process."

Hall shook himself out of his downturned mood "Excellent, have the bridge crew woken up in 30 minutes, and have coffee waiting."

"Aye, sir." The AI flickered out of view, only to reappear seconds later "And, Captain?"

"What is it?" Hall asked

"I think you'll make the right decision, if the time comes."

"And what is the right decision, Athena?"

"That's for you to find out, Captain."

12. Chapter 12: Teamwork

****Rachel****

She felt the familiar sense of nausea sweep over her, as Petty Officer Rachel G-023 descended into the dark depths of the planet's surface. She swung her head to the left, spotting the light catching off of her fellow Spartan's armour. The faint lights situated at the joints of the suit helped to properly visualise Josef's form. The smooth metal platform her, Josef, Sabina and Jacob had stood on several metres above was still carrying on its journey, taking them past veins of metal ores, and sheets of dripping rock.

"Depth, 80 metres" Came the CPO's calm voice over the comms. "Lights out."

One by one, the four commandos deactivated their armour's lighting systems, and she struggled to make out their profiles in the near-total darkness. Only the reassuring contacts on her motion tracker confirmed that her teammates were in position around her, facing outwards from the centre of the platform. She levelled her weapon, checking the sights and action: all good, ready for the likely heavy resistance around the Control Centre of the planet Sigmus IV.

"Watch your sectors, short bursts, keep an eye out for the Monitor." Jake whispered instinctively.

Her stomach jolted, signalling the deceleration of the lift as it approached the bottom of the tunnel. She remembered to turn her night vision filter on. The older Spartan-II's wouldn't need that particular piece of kit, their eyes were much more highly adapted to low-light conditions.

The platform passed down from the ceiling of the cavern, and her light filter had trouble coping with the brilliant white light suddenly bathing them, and even with their assistance, she winced in pain and squinted. The space was enormous, you could fit a Vindication-class battleship into it easily, and still have room to spare.

Below them, the floor was covered in a thick layer of pure white snow, stretching down the narrow valley towards a small tower, poking up out of the white layer. Every upper surface of the building was covered in snow, but the overhangs were clear, revealing the same sort of metalwork as seen in other installations, ingrained with intricate carvings, and seeming to emit a low humming. At the base of this tower, a low, domed, purple building squatted: the Covenant Head Quarters, and through her optics, Rachel could see swarms of soldiers, Elites in bright red and golden armour, Grunt Ultras, a pair of golden Hunters, and a squad of SpecOps Jackals.

One of the Jackals looked their way, and spotted the descending platform. It opened its beak in a screech of alarm, and the camp came to life; the forces quickly formed ranks, and just as the platform lowered them behind the ridge of a hill, she spotted a tall, golden-armoured Elite holding an Energy sword aloft, growling orders.

"Any sign of Abhorrent Revelation?" Asked Jacob. The Monitor had said to meet him at the Control Centre, surely he must be here somewhere.

"Negative." Josef said, shouldering his Sniper Rifle "Plenty of targets though."

"Judging from the landscape, the ridgeline that runs between us and them is going to be the high ground. We need to get there before they do." Muttered Jacob as the lift slowed further, dropping the last few metres onto a snow-free pad

"Sir, I'm the fastest runner, if I can get there and lay down some suppressive fire, it may buy you some more time to take positions." Rachel said, preparing to dump the unnecessary equipment from her armour: detonation charges, rations etc.

"If you think you can get there, go for it. But if you do not have fire superiority within the first minute, I want you to retreat behind the ridgeline, then Josef can keep you covered from hereâ€¦" the Spartan-II pointed to a hillock next to the pad "â€¦ with his SRS. You won't be able to fire on the enemies the other side of the ridge, but you'll be able to slot any brave enough to get over it. Understood?"

Josef turned his head towards him as his name was mentioned, and nodded. "I can do that, I'll also set an explosive surprise on the lift, in case it gets called up to the surface by enemy reinforcements." With that, he was off, sprinting off of the platform and through the snow, which crunched under each footfall.

"Alright Spartans, go." The CPO barked, and Rachel powered off from her crouched position, sprinting as fast as she could towards the ridgeline 400 metres away. Her breath tore through her, hearty pounding, and her vision dimmed slightly as she forced herself to concentrate on running. The other two must've been only metres behind her, but she was faster, and she reached the foot of the ridge in under 30 seconds, kicking up snow in her wake.

"I'm in position" came Josef's voice, and she immediately felt safer, the omnipotent influence of a sniper as well-trained as Josef was nothing to be taken lightly.

"Copy that" She panted, powering up the incline, her boots sinking 6 inches deep into the snow. She reached around and grabbed her MA5D from her back, setting the fire mode to fully automatic, before quickly grabbing a frag grenade from her hip and pulling the pin, keeping the handle firmly down.

She reached the last metre of the climb, adrenaline coursing through her veins, and looked behind her, spotting Sabina and Jacob just reaching the bottom of the hill some 20 metres below her, and pushed off from the ground, practically diving above the ridgeline.

During that arch through the air, time seemed to move at a snail's pace, and she saw everything; a file of Elites and Grunts were leading the enemy assault, screaming and brandishing Needlers, plasma rifles and Carbines. A little behind them, out in the open, were the hunters, flanked by Elite Generals wearing crimson, and far in the distance, she spotted the golden-armoured elite heading from the purple HQ towards the Forerunner structure.

Immediately, she tossed the grenade towards the closest group of enemies, before dropping into a crouched stance and aiming towards them. She counted to two and then fired, spraying half of her first magazine into the leading Elite just as her grenade landed with a soft thump in the snow behind him. The Sangheili instinctively ducked as the first few of her rounds flared his shields, but she kept on firing, and the frag grenade detonated. Without any shields, the Elite was defenceless against the white-hot shrapnel which ripped through him, sending bright purple blood flying high into the air. The grenade also tore into the leading Grunts, and their methane tanks ignited, exploding and injuring yet more of them. She squeezed the trigger again, aiming now for the dozen or so Grunts left unharmed by the explosion, and as she did so, she felt the shadows of the other, older Spartans as then arrived on either side of her, Sabina opening up with her SAW while Jacob tossed another grenade before joining them with his Battle Rifle.

What remained of the advance party quickly retreated, leaving the snow stained blue and purple with their comrades' blood. Three Elites and a dozen Grunts ran back towards the Hunters, and the Jackals still at the camp began firing on the three Spartans with Beam Rifles: a few shots came perilously close to hitting them.

"Josef, move up, cover us from the ridgeline, counter snipe, you two, on me." Ordered Jacob, and the trio charged down the hill, dodging the increasing amount of energy rounds and plasma fire. Rachel felt a round hit her shoulder, and her shields drained slightly, but she carried on towards their target, a protruding spike of a submerged Forerunner structure.

As they approached their refuge, Sabina was hit by a lucky Beam Rifle round, and she stumbled, carried by her momentum, the Spartan-II barrelled into cover, shields flared, melting the snow around her.

"Spartan down!" Rachel called, and dragged her comrade further into the cover provided.

"I'm okay, I'm good" Sabina mumbled, batting her arm away and rising. "Cracked a couple of ribs though"

Jacob looked at her for a good long moment, slamming a fresh magazine into his rifle, and she realised that she was already doing the same automatically.

"Josef, we're pretty pinned down here by those snipers, have you got a shot?" He asked, as another energy slug clipped the edge of their cover, producing blue sparks as it hit the metal.

The response came a second later, as four rapid cracks broke the surprisingly still air, followed by a faint screech.

"Snipers are down, focussing on the Hunters."

"Rachel, Sabina, on my mark, break cover and advance on the enemy, Josef can keep the hunters at bay for a time, but we need to close in and deal with them. Focus first on the Elites, once they're down, toss a couple of frags to daze the big guys." Jacob said, looking over his shoulder at the pair of them.

Rachel nodded, and they stacked up against the wall behind the CPO. A staccato of sniper fire followed, during which, Jacob snapped out of cover, already firing at enemies a hundred metres away. Carbine rounds flew past him, and she quickly joined him in his slow advance on the enemy, firing with her rifle at the elites.

"Fuel Rod!" Called out Josef, and Rachel found herself being dragged to the ground by Sabina as a massive bright green energy projectile soared overhead. Missing them by inches, it detonated behind them, destroying their previous cover. As she struggled to stand up, Josef and Jacob worked together to put down the General who had fired: two sniper rifle rounds and half a magazine's worth of Battle Rifle ammunition and the perpetrator lay dead in the snow.

"Rachel, frags" said Sabina, and Rachel ripped her last two grenades from their pouch, handing one to Sabina, they both pulled the pins and tossed them. That, and the subsequent automatic weapons fire from her and Sabina, took care of the remaining Elites and grunts.

The Hunters shook off the explosions, growling lowly, closing ranks and raising their massive armoured shields in front of them. They were still a hundred metres away, arm-mounted weapons glowing, causing the snow directly underneath them to steam.

Without any expression, the whole team worked as one: Josef pumped two rounds into the exposed midriffs of the colony creatures, causing them to moan in pain and slump forward slightly, Jacob then targeted their necks and joints, any exposed area, Sabina and Rachel ran forward while the monsters were distracted. During the brief run, Rachel swapped weapons, drawing her M7 SMG as she approached the massive beasts.

Under constant and accurate sniper fire, the creatures had no real option but to fight back, and she had to throw herself out of the way of a massive green energy round, shields reacting automatically to the extreme heat of the projectile. While she was down, the other Hunter raised its own weapon, only to have Sabina use it to climb on to the monster's back, plunging a clenched fist into the creature's exposed worm colony in a gap in the armour around its neck. Quick as a cat, Sabina propelled herself away from the Hunter, and as it turned to face her, Rachel saw the bright blue glow of a primed plasma grenade stuck partially inside its neck.

For the second time in as many seconds, she threw herself to the snow as the grenade detonated, splattering her with orange fluid and eliciting a roar of anger from the remaining combatant, who wheeled around to kill the murderer of its mate. With its vulnerable midsection exposed, Rachel grabbed her SMG from beside her, aimed and opened fire, adding her bullets to the multitude of rounds already heading for the same target from her teammates' rifles. The flesh seemed to explode, spraying yet more orange blood outwards, and the

giant beast howled in pain, slumping forwards, its core peppered with lead. Rachel looked on from the floor as Sabina calmly walked up to the dying Hunter, placed her M90 shotgun against its neck, and blow its brains out.

She dragged herself to her feet, and looked over to Jacob, who stood still, surveying the carnage around them.

"Now, let's go get the leader so we can hand him over to the Arbiter's forces." He said, and Rachel spotted Josef half-running down the hill behind him. She turned and faced the Forerunner structure: Sabina was in front of her, calmly replacing the spent round of her weapon.

"Should be easy, it's only him left." Sabina's Eastern European accent came over the comms. "What does he have left to throw at us?"

****Lance Corporal Sarah "Hawk" Hawkins****

"That sniper's nest is really starting to piss me off!" Yelled Captain De Santa, throwing himself into the doorway of her position, carbine fire tracing his movements, kicking up dust and melted sand.

"Sir! Enemy fireteam moving up the street with sniper support, I count three Jackals in a tower roughly 300 metres south!" She yelled, as she popped out from the doorway and firing her rifle down the street before immediately retreating back inside as plasma and energy fire tore into the metalwork of the building.

"Copy that Hawkins, We're holding our own on the eastern and northern flanks, but these damn snipers are tearing the southern edge apart, I need volunteers for a fireteam to neutralise them." He yelled, as the radio lit up with contact reports. As soon as the Spartans had gone, a fierce enemy counterattack had started, pressuring all sides of the ODSTs' pocket inside the base. Air support had been limited so far, but the ferocity and fanaticism of the attacking forces had been almost overwhelming, several men had been bitten by rabid Grunts.

"Yes sir, Ramirez, Del Rio and Martins, you're with me!" She called out, and the requested soldiers assembled from the upstairs floor, all in various states of dishevelment. Ramirez was limping slightly, and Sarah saw a black scorch mark on his left calf, which worried her, but if he could walk, he could fight. "Sir, we'll get that sniper nest dealt with."

He nodded "Get it done, the Marines are breaking through the northern wall, but they're too slow, if you can ease the pressure off, we can link up with them and push through the base." He was cut off by the loud sound of a large-calibre gun firing, followed by a dull thwump in the distance. "Oh, and they have a Scorpion, so try not to hang around the tower for too long afterwards, you know how trigger happy Jarheads are." And with that, the Captain was gone, and she was suddenly in charge.

"All right, Ramirez, get the plasma cutter." She said, formulating a plan in her mind. "We can't go out on the streets, so we'll go through the buildings, clear our path and find our way into the

tower." She looked at the soldiers in front of her, and worried about who was likely to die doing this, but they were Helljumpers, and this is what we do.

"Roger that LC, you want a roomy hole? Or speedy?" Said the Private, retrieving a handheld cutter from his backpack and kneeling down next to the southern wall.

"Speedy, we're on short time" She confirmed, and the others stacked up on either side of the future hole. She stood square facing the outline, and Ramirez traced the white-hot tip of the cutter over the wall's metal surface, carving out an outline big enough for a human to fit through, then backed away from the wall.

"Let's go." She muttered, and lashed out with her foot, knocking the metal cleanly out of the wall. Del Rio and Martins piled into the room, and seconds later the TEAMCOM status lights of the two blinked green, the all clear signal.

They continued on like this, cutting and breaching wall after wall, making their way through the long row of covenant buildings towards the tower. Each building they entered was empty, but plasma rifles and pistols were abandoned on work surfaces and on communications consoles. By the time they neared the tower, each ODST had a stolen plasma rifle secured to their armour: ammunition was short.

"According to the latest imagery from the _Corbulo_, the tower is across the street to the south, beyond this wall" Sarah said, consulting the live feed on her HUD. The image shown was of the lattice of passageways and streets in the covenant base. One structure was highlighted in orange: the Snipers' nest. She watched as bright blue beams of energy shot from out of the top floor down into the base below.

"Torch the wall." She said, and within seconds, the four ODSTs were out of the building and running across the street to the tower entrance, keeping low to the ground and scanning the rooftops and windows. As they hurried through the doorway of the tower, the high pitched whine of approaching impulse engines sounded from the East, and Sarah stuck her head outside to see a flight of Phantom dropships, accompanied by a number of tuning fork-shaped Spirit dropships, swoop over the skyline above them.

"Shit, covvie air support." She snarled, thumbing the fire select button on her MA5C. "We gotta move"

"Moving!" acknowledged Martins, and threw himself out of the hole, sprinting across the street. She waited for the following sniper fire, but none came. Martins entered the tower, then crouched low, sweeping the inside for movement.

"Alright, looks like they're not paying attention, go!" She ordered, and Ramirez and Del Rio followed their comrade, and with the same result; no sniper fire from above. She followed suit, and within seconds she was leading them through the iridescent interior. They went through a doorway and entered a room with a glowing blue pad on the floor in the centre of the room. Blue gas seemed to be blown up from this pad, and the air seemed to shimmer in an upward plume.

"Grav lift" mumbled Ramirez, "Hate these things."

"Only way up, ill take point" she said, and confidently marched into the plume. Instantly she felt the almost debilitating wave of nausea, which thankfully faded quickly as she felt an invisible hand lift her into the air up the tall tower. She shouldered her rifle on the way up, and as soon as she felt the deceleration she flicked on the bright flashlight on the end of the weapon, hoping to blind any adversaries at the top.

She was carried through a circular aperture, which closed smoothly beneath her to form the floor of the sniper tower. As the grip of the gravity lift relinquished its hold on her, she swung her head left and right, desperate to gather as much information about the situation as possible: the bad news, she was surrounded on all four sides of the roughly circular open-topped tower. Jackal ultras wielding beam and focus rifles, at least half a dozen, were split into four three-jackal teams, firing out of the room into the base below. The good news, they were all focussed on the flights of dropships hovering over and around the central spire, they hadn't yet noticed her, and she watched with bated breath as one of the avian aliens aimed towards the new air force and fired. The dropships weren't with the loyalists!

"Attention all UNSC forces, covenant air power is of Separatist origin, I repeat, do not fire on the vehicles!" she yelled on an open channel, broadcasting on all UNSC communication bands.

She panicked as she felt the gravity lift activate, and was able to side-step the opening portal as Ramirez floated through, closely followed by Del Rio and Martins. She signalled to them with her hands furiously, ordering them to wait for her mark. They crouched around the central pad, each ODST focused on one Jackal team.

"Mark" she said calmly, and four automatic rifles opened up, shell casings sounding like a cascade of bells as they tumbled downwards. Bullets flew, the air filled with the smell and sound of gunfire. Seconds later, 12 jackals were dead, 3 having fallen off of the tower in their deaths.

They quickly moved to secure the platform, pushing the remaining corpses down below.

"These things stink" grumbled Del Rio, trying to wipe the blood from his hands. He had a point, the kig yar had been dead for seconds, and yet still the disgusting combination of the smells of vinegar and mud had already begun to permeate through their helmet filters.

"You're not wrong" she said. Now that the adrenaline was wearing off, she could hear the familiar voice of captain De Santa.

"Hawkins? You still alive up there?"

"Yes sir, enemy snipers neutralised"

"Good work, and good call on the dropships, I had to practically wrestle the controls away from that idiot in the Scorpion."

"You've made contact with the Marines?"

"Yeah, they broke through just now, and the separatist forces have landed, most are pushing the loyalists back from the central spire, but a good number of them disappeared inside the structure. We think that they'll drive the enemy towards you, so you have orders to defend that position until the last second. Deny enemy access at all costs. Understood?"

She brought up the tactical map on her HUD; blue/green contacts, the Separatist forces, were advancing slowly from the centre, and dozens of red dots were retreating towards their four yellow icons.

"Understood sir, Hawkins out." She turned to the others "Get on these beam rifles, use them, not as much recoil as a SRS, about 11 shots per gun. Should be some more around here somewhere" She looked around and spotted a small rack of dark blue rifles "Here. Del Rio and Martins, you're on the guns, Ramirez, spot and call out targets for them, I'm going defensive."

They rushed to work, the two marksmen quickly getting an awkward if functional grip of the alien weaponry, and Ramirez using his helmet's optics to call out targets. She turned away from them, away from the heavy sound of distant small arms fire and towards the only entrance and exit into the tower. She reached around and retrieved an Antlion Anti-personnel mine from her pack, carefully setting it up next to the circular pad, transferring the arming controls to her HUD.

"LC!" Ramirez yelled "They're getting too close, we can't hit them!"

"Drop a frag!" She responded, before stopping, smiling widely "Scratch that. Happy Birthday Ramirez" She grabbed the M319 Grenade Launcher from her hip and tossed it his way. He caught it deftly, and she slung her bandolier of 40mm grenades on the floor next to him.

She couldn't see his reaction behind the visor of his helmet, but she guessed that he was grinning like a kid in a candy store.

"Sure thing boss, I owe you one!" He said, grabbing the first of the grenades and leaning over the edge, firing it downwards into the alarmingly large crowd of aliens approaching the base of the tower. She heard the explosion, but was too busy focusing on the spire about 300 metres distant. The Separatist dropships had all taken off, firing a few plasma rounds as they did. All but one. One Phantom hovered low to the ground in the courtyard, and she zoomed in using her helmet optics to see a large, red armoured Elite striding towards the spire, talking to a lower Elite who respectfully strode a pace behind him.

"Those Spartans better not have itchy trigger fingers." Del Rio noted. "That's a pretty high ranking hinge-head."

"LC!" Ramirez shouted "They've broken through the-"

He never finished his sentence. A bright purple flash of light seemed to explode in front of them as a single crystalline projectile from a Needle Rifle down below struck the Private at the base of his neck, spurting blood over his comrades. The OST was sent spinning by the

high-angle impact, collapsing to the floor with a pitiful grunt of pain.

"Man down!" Yelled Martins, and he immediately dropped to Ramirez's side, rolling him over onto his back. He was still alive. His eyes rolled into the back of his head and he slumped into unconsciousness. Martins immediately grasped the long needler round and yanked it free, a move that would prevent the crystalline shard from 'supercombining', or as one serviceman said "removing flesh from bones a hell of a lot quicker than a pack of hungry wolves!". Immediately the ragged wound in Ramirez's neck started spurting blood, and Sarah rushed to his side to help put pressure on the wound.

"Get the BioFoam." She said calmly, as she pressed her combat gloves down onto the man's collar, and felt the sickening movement of bones under her palms.

Del Rio stooped besides her with a small canister, and injected the wound with a foaming green fluid which quickly sealed off the bleeding and formed an airtight seal around the wound. It would also prevent his bones from grating together too much, and would numb the area.

"Vitals are stable." Martins said, consulting Ramirez's armour systems "But he needs to move now."

"Agreed" She said, wiping her comrade's blood off of her hands with a bandage. "Set up rappelling wires from this side." She pointed towards the edge of the tower facing the ODST-held positions. "Get him out of here and back to De Santa. You too private." She addressed Del Rio

Suddenly, they whipped around as the circular aperture opened, and the hulking figure of an Elite warrior rose from the ground like some ghostly apparition. The Sangheili was clutching an energy sword in one hand, and instantly made a dash towards the group of ODSTs. Her gun was out of reach, she made a grab for her combat knife, but was bowled over by Del Rio, who had propelled himself at the attacker, combat knife in one hand. He met the creature, thrusting his blade into its chest and kicking it between the legs hard, but in its last act, the alien thrust its Energy sword forward, piercing the ODST battle armour with ease, slicing through the man's lungs before protruding out from his back.

The mortally wounded soldier shot her one last look, visor depolarised, face contorted in pain.

"Good luck ma'am." He wheezed, nodding.

He grimaced as he pushed forward, shoving both himself and the dying elite into the circular space, and it was only after he fell that Sarah saw the pin and lever from an M9 Frag Grenade on the floor. She heard and felt the detonation below, and silently thanked the man she barely knew for saving their lives.

"Move." She barked at Martins. She dragged Ramirez to the edge of the platform, retrieving his rappelling gear from his armour. She pushed the bag into Martins' hand along with her own. "Rappelling. Now."

The dazed ODS'T stumbled over, securing the climbing ropes to the tower's wall with a magnetic clamp. While he set up, she armed the AP-mine which could have saved Del Rio's life moments before to kill the next unfortunate hinge-head. She rushed to help the Private soon after, and within 40 seconds she was attaching the rope to a small unit on Ramirez's belt. This was an automatic feeder which should hopefully slowly spool out rope, allowing the injured man to descend to the floor outside.

Together, she and Martins heaved their comrade over the edge, whereupon he began to drop slowly along the line. They quickly set up themselves, and descended alongside him, scanning the rooftops below for enemy activity. When they had dropped to 6 metres above the roof of the adjacent building to the tower, a massive explosion issued from above, sending debris down towards them. The AP-mine had done its job, and perhaps too well, as the immense heat and shockwave had weakened the tower.

All her and Martins could do was look up in shock as the half-melted platform collapsed, severing their lines and toppling eastwards, mercifully away from them. They entered free-fall, and she tumbled besides her comrades. The wind tore past her, the ground rushed towards her; she felt a sudden jarring jolt of pain from her back and saw the edges of her vision fade into dark. She looked over and saw Martins struggling to get up beside her. Her final effort went into checking her HUD for Ramirez's vitals, only to find her own looking considerably worse. She sighed deeply, letting the blackness consume her. She opened her eyes and looked up at the sky, and slipped into unconsciousness.

13. Chapter 13: Control

****Cro 'Cylon****

"Shipmaster." Announced one tired-looking warrior, bowing his head respectfully "Have you been informed of our progress?"

Cro looked around the busy space; in front of him stood the spire central to the base, which had taken a couple of explosive rounds from the annoying human vehicle at the gates. The Humans called it a "Scorpion", after one of their Earth's native species. How unimaginative. He had had a good view of the human forces from his Phantom; they fought well, as they always did, but their tactics were questionable at best. They had pushed into the base with frightening ease (were all of the defending troops lame?) on two fronts, and had roughly 35% of the encampment under their control. Cro was especially impressed at the small group of humans who had seized a disproportionate amount of the territory held for their numbers. For once he was content to have these warriors as enemies, these "Hell-jumpers", rather than having to fight against them.

He turned to the soldier "I have indeed, brother, but I would like to hear it in your words." The warrior stood a little straighter, obviously honoured that the Shipmaster valued his input.

"We deployed troops to the surface roughly 15 cycles ago, and the enemy has been pushed back in all directions. We have had to make some alteration to our armour systems to avoid accidents, from both

our own troops and the Humans." He demonstrated, activating a chromatic buffer and turning the entirety of his armour a dark green colour, what the Humans would call 'olive', again after one of their Earth species.

"Impressive" He admitted "Have you come into direct contact with the Humans yet?"

He shook his head "Not yet shipmaster, the enemy lies between us and them on two fronts, they shall be dealt a swift blow."

"Indeed" Cro murmured, turning his attention to the Spire "And where does the coward hide?"

"There is an elevator inside the structure shipmaster, none have gone down yet, we awaited your command."

Cro saw his strike team lined up ready for inspection and orders outside the door to the Spire: they stood tall and proud, wielding a wide range of armour types and weaponry, staring straight ahead.

"Many thanks" He said to the warrior, dismissing him with a wave of his hand. The exhausted Sangheili bowed once again and departed to join his men. Cro began to walk purposefully towards his team; he had to act like a confident leader, even if he himself had some doubts about killing his own kind in battle for the first time in 30 years; he stood before the five special operations commandos, and spoke.

"I'll be brief, we need to seek out the traitorous cur that cowers inside the forerunner ruins beneath. He has run across the galaxy to avoid the punishment he deserves, he has stolen, cheated, murdered, betrayed all those who held him dear, and now we will be the ones to bring an end to his madness, to drag him back to Sanghelios and make him answer for his crimes. The Arbiter himself commands it. Honour you oaths, act true, and we will be successful." He drew his energy sword and raised it into the air, and the Sangheili team did the same, growling and bowing.

He felt the explosion before he heard it, a shockwave rippled through him, and a split second later his ears were left ringing by the blast. He wheeled round to see a sniper's tower a few hundred metres away erupt into flames, crumpling into a heap of twisted metal. As the smoke began to billow from the fuel cells in the base of the tower, he dragged his gaze away from the spectacle to his men. They had all done well not to let the blast get to them, they retained their ranks and waited for orders.

"If the humans are done destroying a perfectly usable tower, we shall commence the assault" He quipped, drawing a couple of chuckles. "Keep your formations, follow me."

He approached the Spire's entrance, but suddenly heard reports over his communicator of a breakthrough in their lines, enemies heading their way. "Take positions!" He yelled, leaning against the doorway of the entrance, he levelled his Needle Rifle towards the eastern entrance to the circular space. Every Sangheili within earshot scrambled to get to cover, and Cro quickly changed his armour colour from its natural bright golden colour to that of his allies.

The first Grunt to round the corner never knew what hit him, but Cro did: everything. At least a dozen plasma rifles fired on him, and he had to restrain himself so as not to give away his position too early. Then, without so much as a warning, he saw the bright red curved hull of a Revenant light assault gun carriage speed around the corner, followed by a dozen Elites plus double that of Grunts.

"Focus fire on that Revenant!" He commanded into the radio, and two plasma grenades soared through the air and stuck to the vehicle, accompanied with a barrage of plasma and needle fire. In its last moment, the vehicle had time to swing its turret around and target the entrance of the Spire; the pink plasma mortar curled through the air, and Cro instinctively dived backwards into the building, which saved his life. The mortar impacted, exploding and sending anything within a 5 metre radius to the ground, he himself was thrown bodily backwards, hitting his head hard on a coolant spike for the Spire's communications systems. His vision darkened, and he awoke a few moments to see a large group of elites burst through the door, shields flared, firing back out through the doorway.

They all rushed to the pad in the centre of the floor and activated the pedestal, not paying him as much as a second glance as they threw a plasma grenade towards the door and began their descent. He struggled to his feet as the grenade went off, grabbing his rifle and rushing to the edge of the hole, aiming at the heads of the descending enemy. He fired a crystal's worth of shots down on top of them before noticing that the edges of the hole were re-forming a new platform, metal unfolding from thin air to fill the gap.

As the last inch of space was filled, his team came bursting through the door, growling angrily. One had a huge scorch mark across his chest, another a dent in his helmet, all looked infuriated, growling.

"We shall deal with them soon enough" Cro coughed, walking quickly to the control pedestal. "Defend this Spire at all costs. Reinforcements should be here in 20 cycles." He commanded of the soldiers outside, who from the sounds of it were still embroiled in heavy fire.

His unit formed up on the platform, and he pressed the control switch. "These traitors will pay for their impudence" He muttered as they descended. "We have their fleet, their flagship, their fortress. They have nothing." He slammed a new crystal into his rifle, the soft purple glow intensifying.

"Nothing."

****Hall****

"Sir, the coupling is complete, all surviving systems are operational, save for the MAC system, engineering's making good progress, Battlegroup is in formation, awaiting your order to break orbit." Athena said

Hall looked up from his tea, dreading what could meet them at the end of their 12 hour journey to the Babylon's last known position. "Excellent, break orbit ASAP, I'm not waiting around, the Separatists rule the space, and they have that CCS class now."

The bridge was once again full, every console and station occupied by refreshed and alert crew, and their presence was enough to bolster Hall's nerves. These were some of the finest men and women in the Navy, they would not let him down.

"Engines firing up sir, giving it 60%" Winters called pointedly. It had become a point of slight contention between the bridge crew and the AI that they hardly got a word in edgeways. Of course, she practically was the ship, so she knew more about it and its condition than all of them combined, but she had conceded that humans needed to 'feel useful' every now and then.

"All hulls accelerating with us, sir. " Athena said quietly

"Understood" He murmured. "As you were, I'm going to review the action above the planet, see if there's anything we missed. Fetch me in 6 hours if I don't return by then." He stood up from his seat and left the bridge, entering his quarters and locking the door.

For those 6 long hours, he studied after-action reports, video footage, deployment patterns and loss statistics for both sides of the multiple engagements. He was so deeply engrossed in the intelligence that he didn't hear Athena's first summon. When she upped the volume, he jumped slightly before rubbing his eyes and heading to the bridge.

"Alright, anything to report?" He asked, settling into his chair.

"Nothing abnormal sir, although I managed to slingshot us around Sigmus IV's first moon, cut an hour off of our travel time." Responded Winters, smiling mischievously.

"Very good." Hall said. Although Winters' actions would normally deserve some sort of reprimand for not following his orders, time was of the essence if they were to assist the other UNSC forces, and so he was willing to forgive the young Lieutenant.

"Running long range sensors now sir." Said Mallard, typing commands rapidly. "Nothing so far, scanning peripheral fields around the planetâ€¦.. Oh."

Hall's mouth dropped. The entire other half of the battlegroup was right where it should be, silhouetted in the light of the red dwarf behind them, each gun and missile pod glinting red and yellow. Every single ship was powered down, no active radar pulses or communications came from the drifting graveyard.

"Athena, try establishing a handshake with any of the other shipboard AI, their backup power supplies may still be working. Scan for hostile contacts, everywhere, every frequency, if even so much as a ghost blip appears, I want it reported." He ordered. Somehow, the sight of the entire fleet dead in the water scared him infinitely more than if they were under attack. "Take us up to combat alert Bravo."

The bridge activity carried on despite the new eerie revelation, but everyone was unnerved by the floating vessels; Mallard kept glancing

at the spectacle, and Harrison began nervously wringing his wrists.

"Sir, handshake established with the _Heretic_'s AI, but he's not making much sense. I'm not sure he knows what happened, from some of the damage to his circuits I'd say some massive EMP damage, at least 500 Tesla. Source unknown." She seemed troubled herself, her form was flickering slightly, and if she weren't holographic Hall would've sworn that she looked pallid in complexion.

"Athena, what do you mean 'some' of the damage?"

She looked round at him, as if snapping out of a dream "The damage to the AI's codeâ€¦.. It'sâ€¦ messy. Even by human standards. And from the patterns in the corruption, this looks to be self-imposed. I'll dig through the code and try to make sense of him, hold on."

The AI's form flickered as she concentrated, her holographic brow furrowed, eyes tightly closed. While she was in this trance, Mallard gave him a small wave from her console. He got up from his chair and walked over to her: "What is it Lieutenant?"

She looked confused "I've been doing thermal scans of the fleet. There was a story I heard about a civilian engineering vessel caught in a stellar flare over Cascade, complete power failure, even the backup systems. Normally the crew would have died of hypo-thermia before the oxygen ran out, but the entire crew were somehow kept warm enough until the rescue ship could arrive. No-one knows how, seeing as the Black Boxes and AI were fried."

Hall took this in, scratching his chin absent-mindedly. "I remember the incident, the mystery of the _Babbage_. What does it have to do withâ€¦" He looked up out through the viewscreen "â€¦ our predicament?"

Mallard tapped the screen in front of her, highlighting the _Babylon_'s icon. She brought up the thermal view. The outline of the ship showed up a dull blue hue compared to the blackness of space, significantly higher than it ought to be given the six plus hours the cruiser had been floating dead in the water. "You see? Someone or something is keeping the ships warm enough to keep the crews alive!" She turned in her chair "I've double checked, every single ship is the same, all exteriors indicate an internal temperature of about 278 degrees Kelvin, well within survivable limits!"

As the realisation of this dawned on him, Hall gulped hard, his blood pounding. "We can still save them." He whispered. "Good work Lieutenant."

He pushed away from the desk, standing up in the centre of the bridge. "People, listen up!" The entire bridge looked around from their desks at him "Thermal scans show that the crews may still be alive, but we have no way to ascertain their oxygen status, so we need full evacuation protocols now. Send word to the Battlegroup, I want every cabin, hangar and corridor in use, we may not know what caused this, but we can damn sure limit the damage. All vessels are to begin operations immediately, us and the _Chimera_ will stand off to watch for hostiles."

Immediately the bridge electrified, with every member talking at

once, issuing orders and co-ordinating the evacuation. They were all re-energised from the crushing low caused by the initial sight of the vessels by the hope of saving those aboard. Hall stepped back from the main view screen, watching as shuttle craft and dropships were slowly deployed over the next 20 minutes, making the journey between the two groups of ships.

"Sir?" Piped up Athena from the pedestal next to him: her form materialised, reminding him that her previous avatars position now stood vacant

"Athena, situation?"

She looked calmer now, but the aura of shock was replaced by a slight sadness: she glowed a darker orange than before, her arms slumped slightly. Hall realised that AI were more human than they liked to admit, or maybe she was just humouring him with the projections of emotion. "I've checked and re-checked the thermal scans, Lieutenant Mallard is correct, and all crew members stand an 85% chance of survival. However, I have discovered how the ships are maintaining heat so well." She paused, her avatar breathing slowly. "The shipboard AIs are all damaged in the exact same way as the _Heretic_'s. All self-inflicted damage. I thought it was onset rampancy caused by extreme magnetic field exposure, but it's something more. This is quite hard to explain in understandable terms, but I guess that this damage would be like a human intentionally cutting off blood supply to the brain. These AI are dying. They are purposefully devoting vast amounts of their run-time to wasteful processes. Essentially, they are squeezing their life down resistance-heavy wiring matrices in the ships, generating heat. Each wire might not produce much heat, but if you take into account the sheer quantity of wiring, it's enough heat to keep human beings alive." The AI looked up into his eyes, and Hall saw a single glinting tear form under her eye.

"Theyâ€¦| sacrificed their lives to keep their crews alive?" he whispered

"Yes." She said solemnly

Hall nodded slowly "And I'm thankful for it. I need you to keep scanning the peripherals. We still don't know what attacked the fleet."

She bowed slightly "Aye sir." She disappeared

He sat down and watched the army of evacuation dropships descend upon the floating husks. He listened in to radio reports from each of the ships, casualty reports etc. The _Nightingale_ was having a hard time keeping up with the demand for oxygen deprivation treatments, and her NAV AI was struggling to keep up with the sheer volume of traffic; the gentle giant was being swarmed by dropships and shuttles.

"Sir?" Called the on-duty Intelligence officer "Unknown contact coming into view from behind Sigmus V's moon, bringing it up on the main screen."

Hall sat upright, instantly alert. Up on the viewscreen, a vaguely rectangular shape was emerging from behind the satellite, hull lights picking out the outline of a ship that didn't fit any covenant hull

profile.

"What the hell is that?" Hall whispered "Not covenant, that's for sure."

He was interrupted by a transmission incoming from the Marie Antoinette, he wondered when ONI'd get involved. Vice Admiral Yao's voice cut through the air.

"Captain, I have control of the evacuation, I'm ordering you to intercept and destroy that vessel immediately. We can't afford to take any chances." She sounded calmer than ever, ONI always did

"Aye ma'am, we'll investigate, Hall out." He replied, and the link was severed "Prepare for contact, break formation and co-ordinate with the Chimera, chances are we'll need her firepower."

"Sir!" Incoming communication, unknown origin, voice only

"Hailing UNSC forces in the Sigmus star system, you are in sovereign United Rebel Front space, retreat or be dealt with."

The voice was cold, and had a strong British accent. Hall cleared his throat "This is Captain Rich Hall of the UNSC Hydra, we are a rescue force for the Battlegroup in orbit around Sigmus V. With whom am I speaking?"

"My name is irrelevant, Captain Hall. You UNSC types are all the same, with your missiles and MAC guns, we took out an entire Battlegroup of the UNSC's finest warships in one fell swoop. If you don't immediately vacate the area, we'll do the same to you. You have 15 minutes."

The link went dead. Hall stood, cricking his neck and sighing. "Athena, thoughts?"

"He's bluffing sir. I'm detecting a high-energy EMP generator as part of their vessel sir. Rather clever stuff, really, if a little bushcrafty. From the looks of it, their ship is an old engineering vessel with aftermarket modifications, including several oversized Ares Missile pods. She's not entirely defenceless, and her main weapon is that EMP generator. With tech as old and obsolete as those missiles, one can safely assume that their other technology is equally sub-par. My estimates say that we have at least another hour until that EMP is ready to fire again."

"But those missiles, they must have hundreds. Even if they're old, half of the ships are sitting ducks with no defensive systems and delicate rescue operations taking place inside." Hall mused. "Athena, can you patch yourself directly into weapons control and take control of the 50 mm guns? If we can set up an attack vector that puts us on a course in between the fleet and the URF Poker Face, we may be able to keep both us and the fleet protected while the Chimera uses her MAC to take the enemy out."

The corner of the AI's mouth twitched in a smile "Already done sir, plotting course now. Once more unto the breach, eh?"

"Out of the frying pan more like. I preferred fighting the covenant."

She nodded, grinning widely "Aye, sir. The ride might be a little rough, I will be dodging dozens of high explosive warheads whilst simultaneously aiming high velocity 50 mm canon shells at hypersonic projectiles headed for the fleet. All the time while constantly re-calculating the ideal firing solution from the _Chimera_, taking into account the pig that is the handling of this crate. Piece of cake."

****Cro 'Cylen****

"Looks like a human proximity mine Shipmaster, set up to kill any intruders. The traitors were dead as soon as they moved off of their pad." Said the Elite, kicking the mutilated body of one of the Loyalists from the Spire. The various chunks of flesh strewn across the landing zone for the elevator told the story of the Loyalists; a blackened scorch mark in the snow next to the pad showed the origin of the detonation, and the awful tangy taste of human explosive hung in the air, offensive and bitter.

"A fitting end." He growled "An underhanded death for traitorous fools." He moved away from the stained snow, sniffing the air. Humans had been here, even if the proximity device had not lay where it did, Cro could smell acrid residue from their firearms in the distance, and could see four sets of human tracks leading towards the Forerunner structure. "Follow me."

The snow crunched lightly under his feet, and Cro took a silent moment to revel in this new feeling; snow was not common to Sangheili colonies like his home-world, and the sensations were unfamiliar and new. His innocent joy was interrupted as he reached the foot of the hill in the centre of the valley.

He quickly made his way to the crest of the hill, his team following closely, trailing the deep footprints that lead to the summit. The sight he met was one of utter devastation: crumpled bodies of Grunts, Elites, Jackals and two gargantuan Hunters lay strewn around the base of the hill on the other side, each body surrounded by a pool of bright orange, blue or purple blood. Human bullet casings littered the area, and the smell of their weapon discharge was intoxicatingly strong. In the distance, a standard Portable Command Centre blazed, power cells spewing blue flames high into the air, the purple building sagged and melted even as he watched, causing a small explosion as an untouched fuel cell detonated in the extreme heat.

"What human unit could have done this?" Questioned one of his soldiers, seemingly in awe of the destruction.

Cro kicked over one of the Jackals- an Ultra rank, and scanned the battlefield. "These were no ordinary human soldiers. Theseâ€¦" He pointed to the Jackal "â€¦ were elite units. And what do we not see?"

His soldiers looked around, scanning the sightlines and listening to the artificially generated wind in the valley. One of them, Zuka, perked up and turned to face him.

"Human bodies, Shipmaster. Where are the human casualties? The blood from their wounds? Even with superior numbers, at least a few of them

should have been hit." He reasoned, waving his Plasma Repeater to emphasise his point. The others growled, shocked that they hadn't realised sooner.

"Exactly. Intelligence intercepts of the Loyalist communications highlighted reports of heavily armoured humans in the base, unstoppable and deadly. Demons." He hissed the last word; Spartans had become legendary among the rank and file of covenant forces as being near-mythological demons which could not be killed and decimated those who stood before them.

"We need to get to the traitor Mal 'Furak now." Cro growled "I will not have my work done for me by these Demons." He rolled the Jackal over with his foot, turning towards the Forerunner structure. "I will carve my own destiny."

****Jacob****

"Thermals say he's in the next room, how are we gonna do this?" he asked, standing next to a control pedestal. The four man team had met surprisingly little resistance on their way up the pyramidal tower, and had been perplexed by the scattering of Grunt and Jackal bodies outside the Control Centre. All had broken bones and crushed bodies, but no open wounds; hand-to-hand combat induced injuries.

"We go in hard and fast, neutralise secondaries, cover the primary and dominate." Josef immediately put forward. He had been delighted when Jacob had given the order to destroy the covenant base outside the structure, and had happily helped Rachel set up some covenant power units to detonate.

"Or we bang and clear, use the underbarrels and then move in to neutralise, less likely to damage the primary." Rachel countered, holding her M7 by her side.

"I'm erring on the side of caution." Sabina nodded, ratcheting her M90 for emphasis.

"Alright, flash and clear it is. Rachel, on me, Josef, get on the door controls, Sab, get ready to charge, once the flashbangs go out, we'll be right behind you." He ordered, jogging to the centre of the massive corridor. It was a huge space, a long corridor, sloping gently on either side to form an irregular hexagonal passageway, along which a series of large metal doors lay, each one having a small control panel next to it.

Rachel scurried along and crouched next to him, equipping her MA5D rifle and activating one of the custom under-barrel grenade launchers equipped to both her and his rifle. The low-velocity weapon would propel a dense ball of magnesium and cordite, among other compounds, into the control centre. The projectile would then explode, deafening and blinding any enemy within a 10 metre radius.

Sabina took up a runner's starting stance right in front of the fault line in the door, looking over at Josef, who was poised to press the button with one hand while cradling his combat knife in the other.

"Go." He whispered, and the massive doors started to slide smoothly open, revealing the whole reason for their deployment here, the cause

of the conflict both on the surface and in the space above this distant planet.

The doors cracked open, and Jascob was instantly blinded by a brilliant, radiant white light. He closed his eyes instinctively, wincing at the searing pain; he vaguely saw Rachel jerk her head around.

As his augmented eyes quickly recovered from the overload of energy, he turned back towards the light, helmet filter at 100%, and saw the rough outline of their target bathed in heavenly luminescence coming from the far side of him. He stood, arms outstretched, as the light began to dim, perhaps triggered by the door opening, Jacob didn't particularly care, all he knew was that their target was undefended and alone. He grabbed Rachel's arm and shook it lightly, before aiming the grenade launcher at the figure, his HUD superimposing a thin blue line showing the predicted arc of his projectile, showing an impact into the glass floor a metre away from the Elite.

Rachel righted herself and adopted a similar position, and they both pulled their triggers, sending the two grenades on their paths. No sooner had they fired than Sabina began her run, sprinting along the smooth glass effortlessly, it all looked like a successful takedown of a high value target. But, of course, life is rarely so nice and easy.

About halfway down the 20 metre walkway, the two grenades hit an invisible wall, and rippling out from the impacts, an outline of a deployable energy shield appeared. The flashbangs dropped to the ground just as Sabina skidded to a halt and threw herself sideways; all 350 kilograms of armour and Spartan crashed to the ground, sliding away from the incapacitants, which promptly exploded.

Josef wheeled around the corner of the opening door, aiming down his sights at the small purple module on the floor in front of the shield; the shield generator. Jacob launched himself from his crouch, rushing to defend his comrade, and Rachel joined Joseph in firing on the generator, advancing inside the chamber, beyond the doorway.

The room they were in was enormous, it looked exactly like video footage of Installation 04's control room, a massive spherical space, with a ring-shaped walkway raised hundreds of metres above the bottom of the chasm, joined to the side of the space by a thin walkway. Floating inside the ring was a large three-dimensional representation of the planet, showing honeycombs of tunnels and passages throughout.

Sabina had been carried by her momentum to the very edge of the walkway, and was getting to her feet by the time he reached her. She waved him away, grabbing her M90 from her back, and seeing she was okay, he turned to face the Elite, moving quickly towards the centre of the room, towards Rachel and Josef, who were busy destroying the barrier, which flickered out of existence. As a team, they moved towards Mal 'Furak, all weapons trained on the imposing alien, waiting for him to turn around and face them.

"If you shoot me, you will die, humans." Mal growled in perfect English, without turning around. He simply raised his hand, and Jacob saw the small purple unit in his three-fingered grasp. "This, is what you would call a Dead Man's Trigger. It is connected to 15 plasma

charges attached to the underside of the walkway. If my hand releases, they detonate, and we all die." He finally turned around, facing the four Spartans, and if Elites' faces held the capacity, his looked calm, relaxed, in control.

"Ah, Spartans. I'm flattered that your Intelligence would place such a value on my life that I merit such a special attention." He said, still looking calm and relaxed, his golden armour glinting in the light which seemed to emanate from the very walls. "But I'm afraid I cannot allow myself to be taken prisoner. I have so much work that needs to be done on these holy ruins. The Forerunners will provide, as they always have, a way for the faithful to eradicate the galaxy of the non-believers." He sounded angrier now, and Jacob noticed Josef's gun twitch in response to the religious doctrine that had seen billions die.

"Mal. Surrender now, you have nowhere to go. UNSC forces control this planet now, along with the Arbiter's forces." Jacob said, calmly and slowly, silently willing his teammates to hold fire. They were within 5 metres of the Sangheili who could kill them all

The Shipmaster laughed, and it was an empty, hollow sound, echoing in the vast chamber. "No, I don't think so. I still have one option. I know from your records that the Holy Ring had a teleportation system, your 'Master Chief' used it." He spat out the name, growling the syllables. "However, I need a human to operate the mechanism, so which one of you would like to do so?"

"Doesn't that irritate you?" Josef asked, contempt dripping from his words. "That your precious Gods designed all their technology for us unclean humans to use, and not you?"

Jake's breath caught in his throat, why was he antagonising the hinge-head? Then he spotted the soft yellow light of 278 Abhorrent Revelation descending from the top of the room. Josef was keeping Mal's attention on the Spartans and not on the Monitor, clever move.

"It is one of the many challenges they have left for the faithful, to have to use unclean humans in order to achieve transcendence." Mal argued back, nostrils flared, spitting on every hard S. Revelation glided smoothly towards them, it seemed that Josef's distraction was in vain, as the AI passed over Mal's shoulder to hover in front of Jaccob. The Elite stared, dumbfounded at the Monitor.

"Reclaimers! This Installation is at your disposal, we are running at 98% efficiency, ready for activation." He trilled, doing a backflip in the air.

"Oh great." Moaned Josef "We'll never get him to shut up now" Rachel nudged him into silence

"Oracle!" Mal exclaimed "Why do you consort with these filth?" He looked like a kid who'd been told Santa Claus wasn't real, his jaws open in astonishment.

The AI turned to face the Sangheili, his eyepiece twisting and analysing. "You are not a Reclaimer, and your crude remote detonation device has been disabled by a jamming signal. Reclaimers do not intentionally damage mechanisms vital to this Installation's

operation." The orb floated away towards the main console.

There was a moment of silence, as the implications of Revelation's revelation sunk in. Then, five battle-hardened warriors moved into action; Mal grabbed the hilt of his Energy sword from his belt, unleashing twin tines of crackling blue energy, Josef ran forward, swinging his SRS-S5 like a bat, knocking the Elite's legs out from under him while Rachel threw herself on top of the alien, struggling to grab the sword-wielding arm. Sabina grabbed the Elite's legs as Jacob calmly moved around the pile of limbs and stuck his boot on Mal's neck, slowly choking the alien into unconsciousness.

As soon as the long Sangheili limbs slumped, he removed his foot and helped the others tie Mal up with composite cuffs, feet and arms. Josef picked up the remote detonator, ripped out the power cell and gagged the alien with the help of some surgical tape, which given Sangheili jaw anatomy, was a remarkable feat in itself.

"That's one less angry hinge-head to worry about." Remarked Josef, standing back to admire the sight of a 3 metre-tall alien hogtied on the floor.

As he spoke, the sounds of many boots stamping on metal came echoing down the hallway behind them, and they all swung around, weapons raised.

"Yeah, and from the sound of it, plenty more are coming." Replied Rachel. "And they don't sound happy."

"No." Josef said, as he pulled back the bolt on his sniper, crouching. "They don't."

14. Chapter 14: Nightfall

****Chapter 14****

****Lance Corporal Sarah "Hawk" Hawkins, Covenant Alpha Base, Sigma IV

****Status: MIA, presumed KIA.****

"LC? LC!" Shouted a hoarse voice in her ear. She didn't want to move, everything hurt and she was barely coming round. She cracked open one eye inside her helmet, immediately barraged by a flurry of error warnings and system failures; her armour had breaches in the vacuum seal in 7 locations, her weapon was gone and she had "SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL ATTENTION" stencilled over half her vision.

She struggled to rise to a sitting position, breathing heavily at the sudden dizziness the action produced. It was night time, and the air was filled with thick acrid smoke from the blazing fires dotted around her. The roof on which she had fallen had been untouched by flame so far, but the reverberations and shuddering under her told of structural weaknesses. She had to get off of here, and fast. Where were her squad mates? Where was the rest of the ODSTs? Hell, she'd settle for knowing where the enemy was at this point.

Wait. She was forgetting something. The voice in her ear! She looked around quickly and winced.

"LC?" Came the voice again, unmistakably that of Ramirez. He sounded strained, and Sarah marvelled at how well he sounded considering the patched up hole in his neck.

"Private?" She responded, rising unsteadily to her feet. "What's your status?"

"I'm mobile, but all I've got left is my M6 and my knife, where are you?"

"I'm still on the rooftops. Do you have your flashlight?"

There was a pause "â€|Yeah, but why?"

"Turn it on and throw it into the air, my Intel system's shot to shit."

She scanned the rooftops around her and spotted the bright light rise above a roof a hundred metres away. "I see you, hold position, I'm oscar mike."

"Affirmativeâ€|." Ramirez kept on talking but now his words were distorted and disjointed. She turned off the comms and limped to the edge of her building, jumping down through a gaping hole in the roof into the room. She unsheathed her combat knife and crept down the ramped stairway and out onto the streets. The purple metal of the covenant structures was lightly bathed in orange and blue light from the various fires, throwing flickering shadows on the walls and compacted dirt floor.

She flicked on her VISR night vision system, outlining all silhouettes with faint glowing lines, immediately making the almost completely dark streets navigable. She sprinted over to an intersection in the roadways, scanning for any movement, keeping low to the ground and close to the walls, she stealthed her way towards Ramirez's location, occasionally hearing sporadic gunfire in the distance, the low staccato of UNSC rifles and the higher pitched whine of plasma weapons discharging. During the 10 minute journey, she never once heard the sound of UNSC air support, and yet Banshees made passes nearby every 30 seconds, strafing positions closer towards the centre of the base.

She arrived at the rough location of her squadmate, and looked around for any sign of him; it appeared that both of them were doing too proficient a job of hiding.

"Roses" She spoke, her helmet amplifying her voice slightly. The standard UNSC Friend-or-Foe call/counter-call was known by every soldier, and in situations like these it still showed its usefulness.

"Tulips" Came Ramirez's voice, and he stepped out into the middle of the street, clutching his M6 tightly, looking around.

She stepped out from behind a wrecked Revenant and slapped him on the back, glad that they were back as a team, albeit a rather short-staffed one.

"Good to see you Private, how's the wound?"

The soldier tilted his head to one side, shrugging. "Hurts like hell, but the biofoam is keeping me going."

She nodded curtly "What's the situation with Comms or SATCOM?"

He shook his head "I've been conscious for a couple of hours, got a few garbled transmissions, but they're being jammed from somewhere. Covvie reinforcements came in from the other facilities on the planet, attacked in force, scattered us all over the base. They hit hard with air power, rest of our birds have scattered as well. I don't think we've actually taken many casualties, but they broke our lines so quickly. It sounds like there's a stronghold in the centre of the complex, but they're surrounded by a wall of covenant, I couldn't get through on my own."

"Okay, we can't break through, but we can try and find their jammers and destroy them, restoring comms should give us back the capability to win this fight." She thought for a moment "You have any explosives left?" She had used hers on the perimeter wall, she only had 1 frag grenade left, plus a couple of stun grenades.

He shook his head again, swearing in Spanish "I hoped you had some. What do we do now?"

Damn. Without any C12, disabling a jammer, if they ever found it, would be much more challenging. It all seemed impossible, but then she had an idea. "You seen any Marines?"

Before the private could answer, the familiar sound of a frag grenade echoed through the streets, followed by intense rifle fire and the grating sound of a needle rifle being fired.

"Let's go." She ordered, polarising her visor and jogging towards the cacophony, flattening herself against the wall and peering round the corner. From her position she could count at least 3 or 4 sources of muzzle flashes from inside a low building down the street, as well as bright purple flashes from across the street and their resulting streaks of glowing purple needle rifle rounds.

"They're pinned down in that building" She muttered "Across the street, 250 metres north, first and ground floors. Jackals have them pinned down, they're on our side of the street, rooftop, 200 metres." She moved back from the corner to let Ramirez survey the scene for himself; the polished silver of his visor reflected the bright flashes of light.

"Roger that, looks like two or three snipers, and from the shooting, the friendlies are definitely not ODS; haven't seen as much spraying and praying since the academy." He muttered, checking the slide of his pistol. "What are you thinking?"

"Buildings on our side, we get in, get up to the roof behind the snipers."

"I'm on you."

"3-2-1 Mark!" As she finished her countdown, she pushed off from the wall, running full pelt around the corner and down the street, kicking up dust in her wake. Her heart pounded and her vision

tunnelled as she ducked into a building and tore up the stairway, combat knife out and poised. She vaguely spotted Ramirez dart past her and into the next structure, and could only assume that he was ascending with her.

The only way up to the roof was a narrow ladder on the top floor, so she sheathed her blade as she rocketed up the rungs, grunting at the fresh pain coming from her injuries. Dragging herself to the flat surface, she instantly spotted her targets, three bird-like Jackals on the street-side edge of the roof, one on her building, two on the adjacent, already being stalked by a black-suited Ramirez, who had his pistol drawn and ready, waiting for her signal.

She crept forward, slowly drawing her knife, and struck; she wrapped her left arm around her target's bony neck, whipping its head backwards as she drove the blade once into the alien's chest, before sliding it out and thrusting it into the exposed windpipe. Orange blood spilled onto the metal at the same time as two shots rang out from her right, and a second later she heard the thumps as two bodies hit the floor. She still grappled with her enemy, the damned thing clung onto life, scratching at her helmet with razor-sharp claws, so she pulled out her knife and gave the dying creature a swift, powerful kick to the back, sending it toppling over the edge and down three storeys to the dirt below.

She leaned over the edge, waving her hand and shouting "Hey! UNSC forces out in the open, hold your fire!" She hoped they would hear her and not shoot her damn head off.

"Hawkins?" came a familiar voice from down below "Is that you?"

"Depends who's asking" She grinned, recognising the dulcet tones of Martins

"Just the happiest man alive at this point! You seen Ramirez' useless ass yet?"

"Hey pendejo! I'm up here!" Ramirez yelled, smiling.

"Both of you get down here, Covenant have got snipers everywhere."

She looked at Ramirez and motioned for him to follow her. He vaulted over the small gap between their two buildings and followed her down the ladder and through the structure into the street, across the road and into Martins' building. They entered a room, and Sarah counted four olive-coloured-armoured Marines dotted around the room, along with the black-suited figure of Martins, clutching his M7S up to his shoulder. The closest Marine walked over to them and saluted, revealing the blackened plating on his right arm; the same story was told for all the Marines, all of them were battered, with scorched helmets and body armour.

"Good to see you, boss." Martins whispered, taking off his helmet and breathing deeply. She and Ramirez followed suit, cricking their necks. "I came to about 2 hours ago, they came in hard. We got scattered, but I managed to find these guys" He motioned the Marines to come over and join them, and they did so. "May I introduce Privates Spiels, Dancer, Mulligan and Petrovic."

She nodded at each one in turn, noting the various stages of exhaustion and fatigue on their faces. "Anyone got a spare weapon? Or det-packs?"

Mulligan nodded "Take my M7, LC" He tossed her the compact SMG, and she caught it deftly, sliding out the stock and adjusting the sights to her own specifications. He also handed her a bandolier filled with ammunition, and she slung it over her shoulders, nodding in thanks.

Martins frowned "Why do you two want det-packs?"

She turned to face him "We're going to destroy the covvie jamming device, get some comms back up and running, that'll allow us to communicate and co-ordinate."

He nodded. "Funny you should say that, because we're doing the same thing. Before it started up and destroyed our comms, SATCOM told us where they were setting up a jammer north of here, we're carrying enough C12 to blow up a frigate." He smiled devilishly "Wanna give us a hand? We could always use extra manpower."

She nodded quickly "Excellent, how far is the jammer?" She checked that her newly acquired M7 had a full magazine as she talked.

"About 300 metres, only reason it's taken us so long was the snipers. Damn Jackals keep popping up everywhere. Haven't seen hide nor hair of the Arbiter's forces, last I heard they were holding the centre of the base along with the majority of our forces, although their ships broke orbit hours ago, god knows where they went." He recounted, keeping a wary eye on the windows.

"Really? Their orbital support just went? Guess they didn't expect much resistance after they took the main basesâ€¦" She pondered. It was still anomalous that covenant orbital forces would just abandon their ground forces. Something bigger was at work here. But she couldn't worry too much about that, they had to get back in touch with command. "Martins, you take point with Ramirez, Marines, who's your best marksman?"

Petrovic raised his hand, the other cradling a DMR. "I am, LC"

"Good, you're with me, we cover the rear, Mulligan, Dancer and Spiels take centre, spread out, and cover all angles. We'll move out and head north from here, engage any and all snipers as and when you see them, we'll go in hard and fast. You all got flash-bangs and frags?"

They all nodded, and she noticed Mulligan trying to catch her eye.

"What is it Private?" She asked, running her hand through her buzz-cut hair. The Marine held up something familiar, the blackened outline of an M319 grenade launcher, _her_ M319 Grenade Launcher.

"Any way I can use this? I found it in the street." He said, chucking her the weapon. She caught it and quickly checked all the components

were working. The weapon was functional, barrel hadn't bent or warped. Good.

"Thanks Private, thought I'd lost it." She said, pulling a 40mm grenade from her belt and inserting it into the break, snapping the launcher shut and slapping it to her back. The Marine nodded, still looking quizzical. "It's mine, idiot. Now stack up, get your head in the game."

They all formed up on the wall next to the door, she did a quick head count, and tapped Ramirez on the shoulder, signalling him to move. They slunk out of the door, one by one, and formed up in the street, quickly moving northwards, every soldier scanning the skylines and windows, the sound of distant gunfire reassuring them in an odd way that the fight was not lost, that there were still UNSC forces to fire. As one, they moved up the street, occasionally having to stop at crossroads and check the intersecting roadways for enemies, but it was a surprisingly quiet transit to the objective, which turned out to be a temple of some kind, a lone structure in a circle of buildings, with an impressively tall spire.

The formation stopped and stacked up against the wall. She moved quickly but quietly up the line of men until she reached Ramirez and Martins at the front, both of whom were looking intently at the target building through their visors. She crouched behind them, zooming in by a factor of 4, scanning the entrance and buildings around it.

"LC, I spot two Hunters outside the entrance, no other hostiles in the vicinity, guess they didn't expect too much in the way of a counter-attack." Ramirez commented "We got any M41s?"

Martins shook his head "Heaviest thing we've got is that M319 and the C12."

She grunted. "We could flash em, then run up and slap a block of C12 onto their backs, gonna be the easiest way to bring them down, I don't have enough 40mm ammo to kill them both."

Martins hesitated, then nodded "Alright, Marines, get ready to throw all the flash grenades you got at those hunters, me and the LC here are going to run up to them and stick a block of C12 to their backs, and blow them to kingdom come." The four Marines nodded and began stowing their weapons and retrieving their flash grenades.

She handed Ramirez the Grenade Launcher "In case this goes wrong, hold the trigger to activate the EMP mode for the grenade, it might short out their armour for long enough to allow me and Martins to run". She took a block of C12 from Mulligan and stuck a Frag grenade into the soft putty-like explosive. Seeing as they had no detonators, an implanted grenade should do the job. She looked over at Martins and saw that he was doing the same to his block of explosive. When both explosives were ready, the two ODSTs began shedding their unnecessary equipment, ammo, water pack, survival gear, all was thrown off onto the floor in order to make them faster when running towards the hunter pair.

When the two runners were good and prepared, she took what might be her last few breaths in this world, then nodded at the Marines, who promptly armed and tossed their grenades in a high arch over the

building and into the small courtyard. She waited the tense half a second before the deafening bangs and accompanying flashes came, before shooting off from their corner, sprinting faster than she ever had in her life towards the hulking forms of the two dazed Hunters. She vaguely saw Martins sprinting next to her, heading more towards the left hand target, so she shifted her focus right, pulling the pin on her frag in preparation, but not letting go of the handle yet. The distance between her and her quarry closed to 10 metres, and she could feel her calf muscles burning, her bruises and cuts going through fresh agony as she used every muscle in her body to propel herself forward.

As she got to within 2 metres, she noticed the hunter coming out of its daze, beginning to swing its massive plated arm at her. With no time to react, she dropped to her knees, sliding an inch below the sharp blade affixed to the creature's arm, feeling the wake of the plate brush air softly over her face. She twisted her body as she slid past the hunter on her knees and firmly outstretched her left arm, pushing the block of explosive up against the alien's soft orange midriff, letting the handle of her grenade fling loose, priming it for detonation. Now she pushed off from her slide, diving through the air away from the bomb. As she hit the dirt a few metres away, the hunter turned to face her, charging up the massive cannon on its other arm. She scrambled away, rolling and clawing at the ground, doing anything to get as far away from the enemy as possible. Just as she expected death to be upon her, the grenade/sticky explosive combo detonated, and the hunter was enveloped by a ball of fire. The shockwave threw her against the nearest wall, and she felt something break. Her helmet slammed against the wall and her vision went black, or at least she thought so, but it was just the dust and debris thrown up from what was left of her mark.

As the smoke cleared, she struggled to her feet, looking up to see two of the Marines, Mulligan and Petrovic, crouched next to her. The latter was in a combat stance, swinging his M392 around slowly, scanning for secondaries while Mulligan tapped on her helmet, moving his mouth for some reason. Talking, she realised, he was talking to her, but she couldn't hear him, just a soft ringing and static. The blackness eating at her periphery faded away, and the marine's words started permeating through the ringing.

"Corporal? Corporal? Can you hear me? Are you all right? Talk to me here, man." He said, frowning.

She nodded, sitting up and shaking her head. "Yeah, I'm good, I'm good, how's Martins?" She tried to crane her neck to see over to where Ramirez, Spiels and Dancer were huddled around, but Mulligan moved in the way, handing her M7 and her other equipment.

"He got hit hard by the Hunter as he ran away, don't know what his condition is, let's go." He responded, standing up and offering her a hand up. She grabbed it and rose unsteadily to her feet, dizzy. There were only so many explosions even an ODS could survive in a day, and she was beginning to get a little sick of them.

She gave a thumbs up to Petrovic and walked over to the others. "How is he?" They all stood up and faced her, and on the faces not obscured by full visors there were expressions of shock, disgust and nausea. Her stomach sank and she stopped a metre away from them, what was left of Martins shielded by the others. Ramirez shook his

helmeted head once. She turned away and clenched her fist.

"Grab his tags and ammo, we're still moving on the jammer." She ordered, not having the stomach to look at what was once her comrade and friend.

She motioned to Petrovic to follow as she walked briskly up to the doors of the temple, fresh pain stinging in her muscles. The looming entrance passed over her as she carefully moved toward the hulking machine which gave off faintly visible pulses of blue light. Her visor crackled with static the closer she got to the thing, and her ears were filled with white noise.

"This is it, get some C12 stuck on this damned thing and let's get out of here." She said, turning to find the rest of their motley crew assembled in the doorway, already retrieving blocks of explosive from their packs.

Within 30 seconds the soldiers were lined up on the corner of the square where they'd entered mere minutes ago. She alone stood in the courtyard, holding her last Frag grenade in one hand, desperately trying not to let her gaze fall upon Martins' broken form. They couldn't remotely detonate the C12 due to the jamming signal, so explosive detonation was the only way. She pulled the pin and tossed the bomb expertly, dashing back to her comrades and seeking cover as the grenade exploded, taking the jamming device and half the covenant temple with it.

Almost immediately, hundreds of transmissions flooded their receivers, which slowly became less chaotic and more like the ordered communication grid it should be. Air strike orders, intra-unit comms, and most importantly, orbital comms were all up and running within minutes.

One communication cut through the mess, directed at Hawkins herself. The gravelly voice of Captain De Santa barked at her: "Hawkins? Status?"

She sat down heavily and leaned her head back against the wall "Operational sir, lost Martins and Del Rio, we're with Marines just next to where the jammer was."

"Stay put, I got a Pelican inbound to your position, Kilo 784, with Hornet escort. FLEETCOM's ordering us to regroup in the centre of the base. The Corbulo and Wolfgang are dispatching Pelican Gunships and Vultures to dominate the air and provide Combat Air Support. We're almost out of this, one final effort is all that remains."

"Roger that sir." She paused, remembering something in the back of her mind. "Sir, any word on the Arbiter's orbital support? They left in a hurry."

De Santa sighed into the mic "We're fighting alongside some Separatists in the centre, they all seem to be convinced that they'll return, but I got a transmission from INTEL on the Wolfgang just before the jammer went online, the covenant fleet, including their new CCS-class Battlecruiser, left orbit on the exact same trajectory as the rest of our fleet. Which doesn't historically turn out well for us."

"Jesus." She replied, shocked "God help our ships if they should turn on us. God help them."

****Hall****

"Athena, what exactly am I looking at?" Hall growled. Moments after they'd started their offensive manoeuvres, the URF ship had fled, taking cover behind the moon of Sigmus V. This was irritating, as they didn't have imagery of the other side of the moon and therefore couldn't see where exactly the enemy ship was or what actions it was taking. He'd ordered their hybrid vessel to follow the enemy ship around to the dark side of the moon. Upon arrival, their passive radar systems had lit up, showing dozens of medium-tonnage contacts in the darkness zone.

The AI flickered into existence besides his chair, looking panicked. "I've double checked the radar readings, they're not lying, the _Chimera_'s sensors confirm 39 corvette-sized vessels rising from the moon's surface, heat signatures point to conventional weapons as well as multiple nuclear payloads."

He pounded his fist on the arm of his chair. "Damn it!" He grunted "They wanted this. They disabled the other ships to lure us in so they could finish us off." He'd walked straight into their trap, as they'd expected a no-nonsense UNSC CO to do.

"Incoming transmission sir, text only, reads: PRIDE COMES BEFORE A FALL, CAPTAIN." Athena said, displaying the taunting words on the view screen. "You'd think that they could come up with something else a little less cliché, I mean, that phrase is a fallacy anyway, the original line is 'Pride comes before destruction', which is even more suitable for this circumstance."

He rolled his eyes, smiling in spite of the terrible situation. That was the gift of having an AI aboard, they always knew when to be pedantic and witty at the same time. Even now, on the brink of death, he was smiling. "So they may kill us and decimate the battlegroup, but their biblical knowledge will be flawed. Great." He had to think of something to do, some action to take; the bridge crew were all looking expectantly at him, some with fear in their eyes, some with disbelief, and even a couple who were angry, most likely with him for getting them into this mess. What do the Insurrectionists expect him to do? What would he normally do in this situation? That was easy, he'd retreat and link up with the rest of the fleet, bring the fight to them. Logically, if he did what they least would expect, the URF fleet would be unprepared, but that still wasn't going to change the fact that 39 ships' worth of missiles would rip them apart.

He had an idea, a crazy one, a last-hope one, but an idea nonetheless. "Athena, cycle the Shaw-Fujikawa drives, power them up to nearly full. We need to make them think that we're going to jump. Hopefully they should scatter enough for us to plough right through them and slingshot around the moon, try and warn the rest of the battlegroup before they get annihilated."

The AI stopped for a full second, an awful long time for a mind who could perform millions of calculations every second. "Captain, that's... Inspired. I can overclock the _Chimera_'s drive, even plot in a destination solution for the neighbouring system, make it look

as if we're about to jump. I'll vent the main reactor and then push engines to the redline. Course laid in, executing in 5."

The entire ship started vibrating, the slip space drive aboard their conjoined twin ship preparing to tear a hole in space time. On the main viewscreen, Hall saw the enemy ships scatter away from their proposed slip-space exit trajectory, some firing their Ares missiles in protest. As the oscillations underfoot reached peak levels, they cut out abruptly, and a low rumbling started up from their engines, propelling them forward. From the rear cameras, Hall could see the glowing core of the reactor emitting massive coronas of rainbow coloured light, rippling through space.

"They're onto us, tracking hundreds of Ares missiles, there's no way we can destroy them all." Called out someone in the bridge, who exactly it was, Hall wasn't sure. They were hurtling around the moon now, letting gravity accelerate them beyond their normal operating bounds, and they were beginning to enter the moon's upper atmosphere, superheating their hull to near breaking point. The superstructure creaked and groaned around them and the temperature readouts for the hull maxed out.

"The missiles are taking a higher orbital slingshot sir, they'll catch us up in 20 seconds." Athena said calmly "Powering up point defence systems, I can take down some of them, but there are too many sir and the rest of the battlegroup is too far away to assist. It was a nice move sir, but we have a survival probability of less than one percent without immediateâ€¦"

Off their starboard bow, a massive slip space exit portal materialised, spewing out an entire covenant fleet, lead by a slightly charred CCS-class battlecruiser

"Oh great, more fuel for the fire." Athena quipped

****Cro 'Cylen, Shipmaster of the CCS-class Battlecruiser
Enlightened Prophet****

"Sir, transition to normal space complete, the humans are under fire from an unknown splinter sect, your orders?" Called the weapons officer from his station.

Cro nodded once "All ships, fire at will on those projectiles, blow them from the sky." As soon as the Spartans had handed the traitor over to him, he had been ordered to return to Sanghelios immediately. However, his scouts in-system had warned of low-level radiation sources consistent with older human radiation weapons on the surface of the 5th planet's moon. The human fleet on its way to the planet seemed oblivious to this threat, and their communications systems wouldn't be able to warn them in time. So he had taken the executive decision to make a quick in-system jump to help these humans, the honourable and decent thing to do, regardless of orders.

Their point defense lasers activated, filling the void between their ships and the volley of incoming missiles with a criss-crossing lattice of bright red beams and blooming explosions as the missiles' outer casing was superheated and their explosives ignited. It was over in seconds.

He smirked, feeling at ease in the command chair. "Open a line to the

human destroyer and order the fleet to crest the moon, destroy any non-UNSC vessels there and bombard any land fortifications. The Arbiter wants us to work closely with humans, so we shall use this campaign as a sign of friendship, besides, if they had not aided us in the fight above Sigmus IV, we would not have taken this prize vessel at all, I am sure."

****Hall****

"I'll be damned." Hall whispered "They actually captured that behemoth. What are they doing now?"

"From their attack pattern, cleaning up shop, sir. They're rounding the moon with plasma lines warmed, so I'd say that the URF are about to have a really bad day." Athena confirmed, her orange glow brighter than it had been moments before.

Hall scratched the back of his head, sighing. "Not exactly the strong victory for the UNSC that we'd have hoped for, but we're alive and they'll shortly not be, so I guess that's a result." He looked around the bridge and nodded. "Well done people, we made it, now get us back to the rest of the battlegroup so we can all go home."

There was no jubilant cheering, no rousing applause like there is in movies, but the palpable energy of the bridge staff soared, and faces that had been tired and haggard moments before seemed relieved now.

"Incoming transmission sir, from the Shipmaster, probably to gloat or demand your first born son or something of that ilk." Athena chimed, bringing up Cro 'Cylen's face up on to the main view screen. The commander started speaking in Sangheili with English translation subtitles scrolling underneath.

"Shipmaster Hall, we owe you our thanks for aiding in the procurement of this vessel, and in the capture of Mal 'Furak, so in return we have saved you from certain death at the hands of your fellow humans." The Elite stood from his chair and clenched one hand over his heart. "By your word, Shipmaster, it has been an honour to fight alongside you."

Hall stood from his own chair and snapped to attention, saluting smartly, unsure of how to respond. "The honour has been mine, Shipmaster, I shall pass my highest praise to our Shipmaster of Shipmasters to pass along to your Arbiter. Thank you"

The alien nodded and sat, cutting the comm connection. Hall looked around the bridge and sat down, smiling wryly. "Take us back to the fleet, we need to start towing the damaged vessels back to Sigmus IV and prepare to leave system. Our job is almost done."

15. Chapter 15: Defense

****Chief Petty Officer Jacob-209, Control Centre of Sigmus IV****

The first warning shot forced the Elites back around the corner of the corridor leading to the control room so quickly that it was almost comical. Their flailing limbs and barking growls of surprise and anger echoed down the passageway towards them. There was a brief

moment of tense silence, broken only by the muted struggles of their Sangheili captive, who was writhing around on the ground within his bonds.

Then, a gravelly voice started up in stilted English. "Do not shoot, we are Arbiter's. We help UNSC."

Josef took this opportunity to take a prone position, extending the bipod on his SRS-S5 and setting the end of the passageway in his sights. Rachel was crouched behind their captive, aiming her rifle at the same spot while Sabina pointed her M90 at Mal's head, in case these interlopers were indeed part of his outfit.

If these Elites were actually working with the UNSC, they would've doubtless been told their verification countersign. He aimed his MA5D squarely down the tunnel and spoke clearly. "Roses."

"Tulips" Came the immediate response. The word was difficult for Sangheili jaw anatomy to fully articulate, so it came out more like _Tuliss_, but it was recognisably the right word.

"Stand down." Jake muttered to his team, and Josef stood up from the floor, rifle pointed downwards. Sabina and Rachel lowered their weapons, and he shouldered his, moving slowly forward towards the entrance. "Come on out, we've got your man here."

A half dozen Sangheili walked tentatively around the corner, all shouldering their weapons and looking menacing. Their leader wore ornate golden armour and walked with pride towards them, standing tall. They met on the threshold of the control room, the Spartan almost as tall as the Elite, and Jacob stowed his weapon on his back, magnetic holder keeping it there. The Elite did similarly and spoke in the same gravelly tones.

"I am Shipmaster Cro 'Cylen of the 4th Fleet of Retribution, Cro the Undefeated." He said

"Well, that's not very useful, what happens if he's defeated, he'll become 'Cro the not quite so undefeated but still pretty good'. And that's just not as impressive." Muttered Josef over TEAMCOM. Jacob took the time to shush him and Rachel, who had started chuckling before answering the Shipmaster.

"Greetings, I'm Spartan Jacob-209. I'm guessing you're here for Mal 'Furak." He said in a neutral tone, even though a large part of him saw the loping Elite as a target. He stepped aside and turned towards the others, motioning for the Shipmaster to walk with him.

They approached the hogtied Elite together, and Cro took out a small device which, when held next to a patch on Mal's armour, displayed some information in covenant glyphs, he'd guess name, rank etc. Cro grunted, apparently satisfied that this Elite was the one he sought, and signalled for two of his cronies to move forward and roughly grab Mal, carrying him away with the rest of the Elite troops as guards.

Cro nodded respectfully at the four Spartans "You have my thanks for apprehending him, Demon, but I must know, what will become of this planet? The Ceasefire terms state that neither the UNSC nor we can return to the Rings, but what of this new planet?"

Jacob shrugged "That's not up to me, Shipmaster." He danced around the issue. If the Separatists or Loyalists came to know anything about the function of the installation, they could amass a fleet of ships that could theoretically decimate humanity. Similarly, if the UNSC had sole control, they could decimate the Sangheili. He knew which option he'd prefer.

Cro looked the Spartan up and down, jaws slightly apart. Jacob didn't know an awful lot of Sangheili facial expressions other than Hatred, Pain or Panic, but if he had to guess, he'd say that the Shipmaster was apprehensive. "From what we have gathered from the defecting Loyalists, this Installation could build fleets of vast majesty and power. Too much power in these delicate times could upset the fragile peace between our factions, and result in more bloodshed." The Elite spoke with wisdom far beyond his age, that which can only be learned through the witnessing of so many fools and their foolish demises.

"I would have it that none of us has control of this planet. This much power will not bring peace, nor prosperity, only envy and deceit. I intend to destroy it."

The final words echoed in the vast chamber. Jacob gripped his rifle tightly, hearing the soft whining of the others' suits' as they shifted uncomfortably. He chose his words carefully. "Shipmaster, my orders are to disrupt Loyalist forces on this planet and discover why they are here. I have achieved my objectives in full, as well as preventing the Loyalist forces from activating this installation. Should you choose to attempt to destroy said installation, I don't think it would be correct of me to stop you." He hoped the alien understood the meaning behind his phrase.

The Elite growled rhythmically, and it took him a few seconds to realise that he was laughing, or some equivalent. "You humans use words as weapons, distorting their meaning to serve your own purpose." He shrugged "But I understand your position, we will make it so. As soon as I return to my fleet, we will burn this planet until the surface is but glass." As he finished his sentence, he cocked his head to one side, listening to an incoming transmission.

"Are we seriously going to let this hinge-head turn this planet to dust?" Josef muttered over TEAMCOM. "We need the space. Isn't that what this whole mission is about? We need this planet to rehome refugees."

"Jo, either the hinge head glasses the place, or sooner or later some covenant sect is going to come looking for the armadas buried under the surface. And the covvies have a much better understanding of Forerunner ruins than we do." Rachel said, evidently trying to calm him down.

Before he could respond, Cro 'Cylen muttered a few words in Sangheili and looked directly at them. "It would appear as if your fleet is in need of assistance. It seems only fitting that on our alliance that I should provide such aid." He looked around the Control Centre "We shall have to deal with this place afterwards. Come, there is still much to be done against the enemy on the surface."

As the Shipmaster turned to walk towards the exit, the floating metallic sphere that was Abhorrent Revelation descended into the space between the two parties, humming nonchalantly. "Reclaimers, I have finished disposing of the explosives. I heard that you needed to return to the surface of this world, and I believe I can assist with this." The yellow light at the construct's eye flickered in time with the words, and Cro stopped dead in his tracks to swivel and gaze at the Monitor, looking like he wanted to kneel.

Jacob nodded curtly "Yes Monitor, if you have a short cut out of here, we'd really-" His sentence was cut short as a field of bright orange light enveloped him. He looked around at the other Spartans and saw similar auras of light around all of them.

"What is this treachery?" Cro growled, surrounded in a similar glow.

"Um, that teleportation grid that Mal Furak mentioned, we're about to have a first-hand account of how jarring it can be." Rachel muttered.

There was a blinding flash of brilliant light and Jacob felt like he was tumbling head over heels, stomach churning, all balance lost. He closed his eyes and tried not to throw up, gripping his rifle tightly. His nauseating journey was halted abruptly as he felt gravity pull him down and his boots touching the floor, he opened his eyes to find himself within the Spire building at the top of the elevator shaft.

"I feel like I'm gonna chunder" Rachel moaned, shaking her head.

"Somehow I don't feel like Tinkerbell is used to teleporting organics." Josef agreed, reloading his sniper rifle.

"Hopefully he won't get too much more practise, let's go find some trouble." Jacob said, turning to their Sangheili comrade, who was shaking off the teleportation sickness remarkably quickly, already talking on his communicator, grunting guttural syllables down the line.

"What's the situation, shipmaster?" He asked, stowing his rifle on his back, the magnetic holder slapping it to his armour.

The Elite growled a few final words before looking over at the Spartans "The enemy has abandoned the outer posts on this planet, and are sending all forces to this base. So far, we hold most of this facility, but I believe that the enemy forces that were within the compound have retreated to regroup with their reinforcements." He lead them out of the spire and into the courtyard, and Jacob noticed UNSC forces, ODS'T and Marine, dotted around, refilling magazines, passing sandbags upwards to the snipers on the rooftops, setting up M247H Heavy Machine Gun posts around the space, all facing outwards down streets.

One of the crowd of ODS'Ts walked purposefully towards them, his helmet and armour burned and scorched. He depolarised his visor and shook his head, smiling and revealing the face of Captain De Santa "Well I'll be damned. You actually made it. I hate to ruin the fun, but in about half an hour a whole mess of enemy reinforcements is

going to hit us like a tsunami." He nodded at the Shipmaster "Shipmaster, I assume that we are working together in this fight?"

The Elite looked down at the human, looking almost amused. "Indeed, our ground forces will remain here while we break orbit and help your fleet, it seems that they are heading into a trap. My ground forces will remain here to eliminate the threat. If you'll excuse me, I believe my transport is inbound."

Before they could respond, a bright green Phantom dropship descended rapidly into the courtyard, its gravity lift activating and levitating the Shipmaster into itself. The dropship immediately shot up into the sky, breaking the sound barrier with an almighty thundering sound. De Santa looked around incredulously, grunting, waving a couple of his lieutenants over.

"We should probably try to warn the fleet, I've passed on the message to the Wolfgang in orbit, but the hell of it is that even if they transmit it now, the Separatists will probably still get there first, they've always been faster." He mused as the two men arrived. "These are Lieutenants Bradley and Watts, they could use your help holding this area. We're focussing on holding a central area of the base, we haven't got the men to hold a large area, and a lot of my guys are still MIA from taking it in the first place."

"We're happy to assist sir." Jacob confirmed "Just tell us where you want us, we'll guess the rest."

De Santa opened his mouth to speak, but was interrupted by a Marine sitting at a portable radio station, who called out with a broad Sydney accent "Sir! Enemy movement on the perimeter, strength unknown, but there's a lot of them, recon is estimating at leastâ€¦" The soldier pressed his headset into his ear, frowning. "â€¦Recon's gone dark sir."

De Santa sighed, looking around at the courtyard. "We're on short time, every one! Listen up! We've got heavy enemy activity on our periphery, they're going to hit us hard soon, so set up your defensive positions and settle in for a helluva fight." He turned to the marine sitting at the radio "Send a broad message on all UNSC frequencies, retreat to the centre of the compound ASAP."

"Yes sir" he responded before setting about chattering into the microphone, ordering the retreat.

De Santa cricked his neck, turning back to the Spartans. "Alright, I need one of you on each compass point, each main road has been hastily defended and there's a few LOTUS mines on each road to deter their armour, and the Marines are airlifting in their Scorpion tank to take a static position here to assistâ€¦" As he spoke, the familiar whine of a Pelican's thrusters rose above the background, and the dropship, complete with underslung MBT, descended into the courtyard, depositing the 66 ton monster neatly onto the floor. "There we go, now we're talking!"

As the Dropship let the tank's crew disembark, the radioman piped up again "Sir, Recon Bravo 5 reports that the enemy's setting up a jammer in the northern part of the base."

"Shit, order them to pull back now, and get that message about the trap to the _Wolfgang_ now!" the Captain barked.

The Aussie furiously twiddled dials and barked orders, but looked up, gulping. "Comms are down sir, they must've activated it."

"Shit, right, they're going to hit us hard, now, everyone take defensive positions!" De Santa yelled, and no sooner had he said it than the sky lit up with a bright flash of green, and the Pelican dropship was hit by four or five banshee missiles simultaneously, the shockwave pushed all but the Spartans to the ground. The hulking craft nosedived, crashing into a building and sticking there, throwing dust up everywhere, the tortured roar of the crippled engine almost blew out Jake's helmet's noise filter as the dropship settled into the framework of its resting place.

"Holy shit!" Yelled one of the ODSTs, picking themselves up from the floor.

"Prodios, get up there and get those flyboys out of there, Spartans, you know what to do, get to it." De Santa yelled, marching away.

Jake turned to his Spartans. "Joseph, you're on Eastern road, lots of high structures, and some good sniper points, get to it, kill anything that isn't human/green armoured. Stock up on ammo, we don't know how long we're going to be here."

"Yes Boss." He confirmed, setting off towards the ammunition store at a jog.

"Rachel, you're North, good mix of medium and low-level structures, try to set up ambushes further out, draw them into the mines." He said, handing her his last Antlion Anti-Personnel mine.

"No problem Boss, I'll show these bastards what Spartans can do." She affirmed, heading off.

Jake turned to Sabina "Since when am I 'Boss'?"

She shrugged, and he could tell she was smiling behind the reflective visor. "Maybe when you earned it."

He rolled his eyes "Fine, as long as they don't start asking for a pay rise."

She laughed and punched his arm. "You love it, don't act all reluctant. Now, where am I?"

"Western is better for close combat and demolitions, grab some C12, I see a pretty unstable tower that you might be able to topple onto the path. And that's where the Banshee fire came from, so take an M41 with you as well." He mused.

"I was going to suggest the same thing, Boss." She said, heavily emphasizing his new nickname.

"You are the worst type of person." He said jokingly, giving the time-honoured Spartan gesture of drawing two lines down the front of his visor with his fingers, the beginning of a smiling face, which

she reciprocated immediately before taking off, running over to the hastily arranged supply depot to secure the necessary items.

"And I guess that leaves me with the South. Great." He muttered sarcastically. "I've always wanted to face hordes of fanatical Covenant with only a squad of marines to help."

****Joseph-G164****

"Lieutenant, what's the situation?" He asked the young officer, slinging his SRS99-S5 onto his holster. The long range weapon had been battered a fair few times during his exploits, but he'd swapped out the stock and trigger mechanism and found some extended magazines that should hold 7 rounds instead of the usual 4. Normally he would stick to the standard mag, but today he had a feeling that high capacity was going to be very useful to him.

The man turned around, clad in standard issue marine Battle Dress Uniform, clutching an M6 tightly in one hand. "Ah, Spartan, well, we've got two MGs set up to cover the entire length of the street, two snipers up high in similar positions, we've got one PHALANX Anti-Aircraft weapon set up on the rooftop here and enough LOTUS anti-tank mines to blow half the base to kingdom come spread out further down the road." He looked at Josef's weapon "And another sniper up on that building's rooftop would do us a lot of good, it's got perfect line-of-sight down the roadway."

Josef nodded curtly "Then I'll get myself there and ready sir."

He nodded "That's what I like to hear. Word of caution, the Separatists have heavily emplaced snipers and soldiers everywhere. Our command structures aren't linked, so they'll pretty much do whatever the hell they want, just try to avoid slotting one by accident, they should all be wearing green armour. Good luck Spartan."

"Thank you sir, good luck." He responded, before saluting and marching away towards the nearest building, where he made his way up to the rooftop, taking a moment to reflect on how pretty this place was. He'd find it more beautiful, however, if there wasn't a covenant army about to set fire to the place, or if the sounds of birdsong and the wind rustling the treetops weren't drowned out by the harsh, grating sound of preparation for said covenant army. Regardless, if he lived through this, he'd like to come back here.

He scanned the rooftops, spotting the two ODST snipers further back towards the courtyard and the imposing silhouette of the PHALANX gun. Ahead of him were a trio of Elites, their green armour glinting in the afternoon sun. As he walked to his position on the corner of one of the buildings, they stopped and turned their heads, muttering to each other. He laid his rifle down resting on the slight sill around the edge of the rooftop, looking over to see the Marines in the streets below, hiding behind makeshift cover; sandbags, portable barricades, destroyed ghosts, revenants and Spectres, anything that could resist plasma damage or take a needle round was used.

He got to work establishing himself, calibrating his rifle's scope, laying out a dozen spare magazines next to him within easy grabbing reach, along with his grenades, DMR and its spare mags. Finally, he

laid himself down on his stomach, rifle resting on its bipod, stock firmly pressed back into his shoulder, optics linked with his helmet, ready to fire.

It took less time than he expected for the first Banshee to swoop over the ridgeline and bear down on them; it was quickly brought down by a salvo of 30mm rounds fired from the PHALANX, but more followed, dozens of them, strafing streets and firing their green fuel rod weapons at buildings. He saw flight of Hornets start their defence, aided by green-coloured Separatist banshees, and soon the enemy air forces' attention was turned towards the skies. Soon after, Josef spotted his first target, and with a smile, fired a 14.5x114mm high-velocity armour-piercing round into the Elite's chest, blowing the unaware alien to pieces.

"Nice one mate!" Came an Australian voice from below.

"Thanks, now shut up and start shooting!" He yelled, as a wave of hostile infantry, accompanied by Spectres and Ghosts appeared at the end of the street. The UNSC forces opened up, the two ODSN snipers behind him using their weapons in their intended anti-material role, blowing chunks off of the armour of the vehicles and puncturing their fusion power cells.

As the heavy MGs and small arms began to fire, Joseph settled down to a steady rhythm: sight a target and follow their movements for a few seconds, fire, and then move on to the next one. He was going to be there for a whileâ€¦

****Sabina-S211****

"Spartan, enemies in the next building, you're on point, frag then clear, go!" yelled lieutenant Matthews from his cover. She nodded and walked across the street, firing her M739 SAW down the street to suppress the file of grunts cowering behind a ruined Wraith (the LOTUS mines worked with lethal efficiency). As she arrived at the doorway to the building, an ODSN and three marines stacked up next to her, all exchanging fire with enemies in buildings further away from them. She swapped the bulky SAW for her M90 shotgun, pumping the first round into the chamber and pointing it towards the door. She nodded at the lead Marine.

"Frag out!" He yelled, as he and his compatriot pulled the pins on their grenades, signalling her to kick out viciously at the metal door in front of her, ripping the thing off of its hinges and sending it flying inside the room. As soon as she had demolished the door, she peeled off to the right hand side of the doorway, slamming her back to the wall as the two marines tossed the grenades into the room.

"Stay behind me, jarheads" She ordered, and as the two grenades exploded, she rounded the wall, raising her shotgun and pumping two rounds into the dazed Elite; with its shields down the creature was peppered with lead, and fell to the floor screaming. The Marines followed her in, checking all bodies, all in all, 3 elites, 7 grunts and a jackal pair lay dead in the tiny room.

She nodded "Room clear, move out." She announced to the marines. "I'll set this room to blow, go."

The soldiers moved back out onto the street with shouts of "Friendlies coming out!", and she set up an Antlion AP mine in the centre of the room. They didn't have enough men to take and maintain a larger area, so they were simultaneously defending the area they did have, and were booby trapping the outlying areas.

There was a lull in the fighting, and she used this lapse in projectile death to dive out of the building and into a fallen banshee flier, whose burning carcass provided the perfect refuge from plasma fire. As an unseen enemy shot purple crystalline needle rounds blindly down the avenue, she twisted around to find the tall tower that Jake had mentioned was right next to her.

She turned to the M247H crew on the first floor behind her and signalled requesting heavy suppressive fire. Her request was granted instantly, and her Marine escort took up a position behind the banshee, pouring automatic fire onto the advancing enemy. Under this cover fire, she vaulted over the crashed aircraft clutching two kilogram blocks of C12 explosive, which she stuck to the lower wall of the tower on the street side. When they detonated, the supporting wall would collapse, bringing the whole tower with it, blocking the road to land vehicles and slowing the covenant troops down.

As she spun around to dive back into cover, firing behind her with her M739, she spotted something she never thought she'd see; a green armoured Elite was ducking behind the Banshee, brandishing a needle rifle, the distinctive chinking of its firing mechanism at odds to the cacophony of UNSC ballistics. Behind their unlikely ally, a whole file of green Sangheili advanced, taking up strategic positions behind barricades or in first floor windows, a few even taking up snipers positions on the roofs.

"They picked a hell of a time to join us." She muttered to an ODS as she high-tailed it back towards more stable cover, motioning for the Elite to do the same. She took cover behind a building and waited for the minute-long timers embedded in the plastic explosive to trigger possibly the most ad-hoc demolition in her career. Well, except the bridge demolition as part of the geo-synchronous MAC gun platform _Cairo_'s generator defence.

Her highlight reel was cut short by the twin detonations, followed by the tortured screams of twisting metal, and rounded off with an almighty, earth-shaking crash. She shouldered her SAW and stepped out from behind cover, admiring her handiwork: the once mighty sniper tower now lay horizontally across the road. As it had come down, the topmost section had impacted with the roof of the building on the opposite side of the street, and had taken a fair chunk of the building away with it before shearing off, allowing the shortened length of the tower to lie flat.

As the immense amount of dust started to clear, and the soldiers around her had finished coughing and wheezing, there was a rousing cheer at the sight of the new barrier. A young Corporal sidled up to her, staring at the monument and grinning like a buffoon.

"That's one way to block access, I suppose. I guess we won't even need the Lotuses after all, eh Spartan?"

"Maybe not Marine, but the others might not be so lucky, have them distributed amongst the others, on the double." She said "It's only

going to get worse."

****Rachel-G023****

"This would be so much easier if they didn't have bloody tanks!" Rachel moaned through gritted teeth as she sprinted down the road away from the armoured menace. She'd been fighting for hours with a group of ODSs just behind enemy lines, staging guerrilla-warfare-style hit and run raids on covenant formations. Up until a few minutes ago, this tactic had worked pretty well; her and her motley crew had been harassing covvies all evening without taking a single casualty. Then they spotted the Wraith Mortar tank. From that point onwards, their hit-and-run had turned into just run, and that's what they'd done for the last couple of minutes, run for their lives and try to remember which turns to take to get back to the rest of the UNSC.

"This way, around the mines!" Sgt Horvath shouted as they rounded a corner and found themselves on the straight road to the central spire. They stuck to the buildings on either side of the road to avoid the LOTUS anti-tank mines and ducked into various buildings, passing a curious mix of UNSC and Separatist defenders. She just had time to notice the Scorpion tank take up position at the end opposite end of the street as the direction of the wraith before the enemy armour rounded the corner, prompting the sandy brown Scorpion to belch out 90 mm of tungsten at supersonic speeds down the road, past the hidden defenders and into the centre of the wraith's curved armour. It was an excellent shot, penetrating deep into the enemy tank and igniting the fusion power cell, causing the vehicle to erupt in a blue-tinged fiery inferno.

As the Marines cheered and her heartbeat settled below 100bpm, Rachel cautiously approached the burning wreckage, carefully avoiding the camouflaged mines. Covenant armour rarely came alone; infantry platoons were almost certainly reforming ranks around the corner behind the burning husk. She had to catch them off guard and vulnerable; once she'd determined their numbers, she'd signal for the ODSs to move in and help her strike.

The blazing tank was cooking her, so hot that it was almost maxing out her suit's coolant systems, and as her helmet rapidly polarised to cut the glare, she noticed that the ground around the hull of the tank had been vitrified, that is, it had been heated to such extreme temperatures that it had been rendered into a dirty glassy substance.

She dropped to her stomach as she approached the corner, crawling slowly forwards and extending a fibre optic camera towards the corner, grinning as the tiny device's video feed popped into her HUD: covvies couldn't jam this!

The video showed a large contingent of grunts, elites and jackals milling about, evidently deciding what their next course of action would be. They could be dealt with, a few grenades and a hell of a lot of rounds would get them, what worried her was the pair of Type-46 Spectre Infantry Support Vehicles and the single Type-48 Revenant Light Assault Gun Carriage which hovered further down the street. Individually these vehicles were no match for the Scorpion at the centre, but together, combined with infantry, if they all focussed on the tank, they could potentially take it out.

She scrambled to her feet and sprinted back towards their lines, formulating a rough strategy as she went. Lieutenant Peters looked stunned as she skidded to a halt: she supposed that seeing 350kgs of armour go from 50kmph to nought in three seconds must be jarring.

"Sir, two spectres and a revenant, plus lots of infantry. They'll come through pretty soon, there's just enough room for them to push past the tank. A couple of the infantry have got Fuel Rods, so if they're smart they rush us, fire everything they've got at the Scorpion and then bolt, regroup and hit us later."

The officer nodded, scratching his nose nervously. "This tank is too much firepower to risk, we've got to think smarter than them."

"Agreed, sir. I think that if we pull the tank out of the direct Line of sight and get everyone into buildings, they'll think we've moved, or at least retreated to the next junction. They drive straight onto the mines, bang bang bang, the tank rolls up and catches them off guard. We simultaneously pop up with M41s, Spartan Lasers, M9s, whatever we've got that'll get rid of the mechanicals. Then the rest of us focus on the infantry, the M247H and snipers as well as small arms."

He nodded again "Sounds good, get to it Spartan, I'll spread the word, you get your team prepped, I think we have one M6 Grindell left." He jogged off to relay the plan to his Sergeants, and she waved over her entourage.

They had barely stopped moving before she was rapidly telling them the details. "Horvath, Simons and Petrenko, you're on Rocket duty, go see the QM, Fields and Muller, you're stuck with 40mm grenades, so stock up, I'm grabbing the Laser, I'll meet you at our edge of the mines. Double time it marines, it won't be long before the covvies get a little too curious."

As the ODSTs ran off to the weapons cache, she retrieved the massive M6 Grindell/Galilean Nonlinear Rifle, or "Spartan Laser", and hefted it onto her shoulder. The thing weighed 20kg and could rip through most things the covenant could throw at it. She'd always wanted to use one, but she'd only ever run simulations of firing the highly dangerous weapon during training.

She jogged back down the road towards their waiting enemy, and, pausing to grab some M9 frag grenades, ran over to the waiting ODSTs, two of whom cradled their MA5Cs' underslung M301 40mm grenade launchers and were draped with bandoliers. The other three hefted dual-launch-tube M41 Rocket launchers on their shoulders and carried brown ammo cases. All looked ready for a fight.

She quickly appraised the buildings and assigned the soldiers their positions: two M41s and one of the grenade launchers would be stationed on the left hand side of the minefield in the 1st floor windows, her, the other M41 and the remaining 40mm would be on the opposite side. She distributed the frag grenades amongst them and told them to wait for the enemy vehicles or infantry to activate the mines before engaging.

As they dispersed, she turned and was satisfied to note that the Scorpion had retreated behind a building and that not a single Marine or ODS'T was visible. The stairway she ascended was shifted at an awkward angle, the cause of which became apparent when she entered the 1st floor, almost running into the warped nose of the Banshee embedded in the room. The floor, or what was left of it, was charred and uneven, so much so that she was starting to doubt the structural stability of the entire building.

Pushing these thoughts out of her mind, she walked over to the corner of the room by the window and nearest to the central spire and propped the Spartan Laser onto the window sill which was helpfully cast into shadow by the setting sun. She checked that everyone was in position, then focused on the corner to her right round which the enemy was due to come.

Within a few minutes, the first Spectre's nose poked out from behind the building, and soon the whole vehicle was scraping past the wraith, its plasma turret sweeping left and right across the apparently empty road. The other Spectre followed close behind, and the revenant brought up the rear. All three vehicles had an accompaniment of infantry, the Grunts chattered as they walked, swinging their arms lazily, the Jackals screeched at the Grunts, their voices high and birdlike, and the Elites growled at both of them.

It didn't take long for the formation to find the mines. The grunts and Jackals didn't weigh enough to set them off, so it came down to an Elite Major putting his foot in the wrong place to set one off, which he did so, sending chunks of alien everywhere. This caused the first Spectre driver to panic and jolt forward onto another AT mine, flipping the vehicle upside down and onto a third mine. As the third explosion rang out, the tell-tale sound of rockets being launched started as the ODS'Ts across the way began the ambush. She sighted her target; the revenant had the most impressive weaponry of the lot, and so needed to be put down, quickly. The charge cycle of the Spartan laser started up, and the whole assembly seemed to vibrate and shudder slightly, an ominous red sighting laser beam sprung from the mouth of the weapon. She held the trigger down into its final stage of depression, and the kickback from the resulting shot jerked her shoulders backwards as a blinding red energy pulse shot through the air and into the heart of the revenant, disabling it immediately and setting it ablaze.

The rest was easy. Once the Scorpion rolled into place and began firing upon the remaining covenant, and the rest of the defenders opened up, they didn't stand a chance. The action was so fast-paced and devastating that Rachel only had time to fire three shots out of five that the Spartan Laser could offer. In the end, only an estimated five or six covenant made it out alive.

She counted their losses as she wandered from squad to squad: a guy from the 405th had taken shrapnel to the head and died immediately, two soldiers had been hit by plasma rounds from the revenant/spectres, and three more had been hit by one particularly keen eyed Elite with a needle rifle. Injuries were about double the deaths, mostly minor shrapnel wounds or concussions.

Satisfied, she found a quiet corner and slumped down into a sitting position, exhausted from nearly a week of non-stop action. Her first

Op had certainly been a baptism of fire. And it wasn't over yet.

16. Chapter 16: Finale

****Chief Petty Officer Jacob-209****

"You look like shit Jay." Sabina winced as he limped over. They'd all been fighting throughout the night to repel the Loyalist attacks, and he'd taken a beating. His visor had a prominent crack running from one corner to the other, part of the armour plating on his shoulder had been burned away, and almost every panel was pitted and dented, including his energy shield systems. As a result, the maximum strength shield the damaged unit could sustain was about half of its full strength. The only other serious damage to his suit was the mechanical servo controlling his left lower leg: the unit was still operational, but the movement was jarring and juddering.

"Well, you could've tried to be tactful about it." He muttered, popping the neck seal on his helmet and stowing it, breathing in the fresh morning air. The courtyard around him was littered with the detritus of war: spent ammunition cases, empty boxes of medical supplies and rubble. Plasma damage was the dominant feature of the now ruined buildings around them, and the temporary UNSC field hospital (a glorified tent with one mobile sterile field generator.) was tattered and holey.

Sabina removed her own helmet, blinking in the bright sunlight. The night had only just ended, and with it, the return of radio communications had happened. Instantly, the battle turned against the struggling Loyalists, and they had been driven back, choosing to retreat from the base rather than be run down. Not that the UNSC/Separatists were in any position to pursue. They had no air support, and over a third of the Marines/ODST were dead or wounded.

"Yeah, I could've, but mother always told me never to lie." Her smile faded almost as quickly as it has come, the simple phrase she'd said reminding them both that Spartans didn't have mothers. Not for 30 years. She sighed. "Anyway, what's next?"

"Well, Captain De Santa wants us to lead a strike team to eliminate the remaining Loyalists. According to satellite imagery from the Corbulo they're retreating to one of the outlying bases. About fifty Elites, twice that number of grunts, 50 Jackals, plus about 5 Wraiths and a half a dozen smaller IFVs." He said. The lifting of the jamming signal had given way to a wealth of tactical information from their orbital support, and Captain De Santa had assured him that heavy air support would be on station to provide Close Air Support. "We've got two Vultures and a flight of Pelicans with Hornet escort inbound, they're going to regroup with us on the northern meadow outside the base."

She nodded "I saw some evac birds flying over earlier. What's our role?"

"We're on the first Pelican with the ODSTs, second bird's full of Marines, third's got a full Sangheili compliment. The idea is that our air support takes care of most of the armour and we deal with the

infantry." He recited. "But we can talk about this on the flight, dust off's in 20, get Rachel and Josef and meet me there, I've got to round up our ODST contingent."

"Copy that, I'm sure they'll glad to be on the offensive for once." She said, catching his arm as he turned to leave. "Jake, I don't like this. The Covvies never just retreat, even when they're losing. Something's up." She frowned slightly, looking him in the eyes.

He sighed "I know, but what can we do? Leave them to re-arm? We may well be walking into a trap, but we damn sure have the firepower to force our way out of it."

****Corporal Sarah "Hawk" Hawkins****

"Well done Corporal, you've earned this" Captain De Santa muttered as he told her of her battlefield promotion. "Now that the jammer is down, we're about three hours away from wiping the covenant scum from this godforsaken planet." He glanced over at the white-armoured Sangheili Ultra standing next to him, barking orders to the milling Elites in the courtyard. "Present company excluded."

The Ultra growled "Naturally. My Elites are ready to begin the final assault, they thirst for blood and their aims are true. When will battle commence?" He held a needle rifle in one hand, pointing to the floor, and he towered over all the ODSTs in their loose U shaped formation around the Captain.

"Commander, follow us, we'll get you and your Elites to their dropship." He said dismissively and turned to the 20 or so ODSTs. "Alright ladies and gentlemen, we're bringing the fight to them. You will travel in the first Pelican with the Spartans. They have tactical command of the assault unless I say otherwise, follow their lead and we'll have this done in no time at all. The Marines and Elites will follow you up, along with heavy AC-220 support. There's not much more to the mission, just shoot the bastards until they stop shooting back."

There were cheers from the others, but Sarah had had enough of war for one day. Her joints and muscles ached and twinged from the beating they'd taken in the last few days.

"Get to the staging area, ASAP, your bird is Hotel Juliet 175, good hunting. When you storm the battlefield, how do we do it?" The captain shouted the last sentence, a grin playing across his face.

"Feet first!" The assembled troops chorused, and Sarah joined in wholeheartedly, shaking her new M7S in the air along with her colleagues.

The air was filled with the stamping of combat boots as the Special Forces, along with a detachment of marines, jogged northwards out of the central courtyard.

As she went, she tried to position herself next to Ramirez and her new squad, formed from the remnants of old squads. With her and Ramirez were a Private Georgia Baker and a PFC Adrian Pierce. Ramirez was only just in the fight, having been patched up by a Marine Combat Surgeon. The ugly red wound running along his neck now looked a week

old, but the surgeon had pulled her aside during the procedure and given her a fresh canister of biofoam, warning her that if he exerted himself too much the injury was liable to reopen.

"You good Private?" She asked. He showed no pain, and his pace was as rock steady as the others'.

"I'm good man, I feel like I could take out the whole covenant army solo." He grinned.

She smiled back, focusing on the journey. They wound their way through the streets and alleys until they came to a 5-metre wide gap in the perimeter wall. Passing through it, she saw a half a dozen Pelican dropships spread out over the area, each with a M12 Warthog attached to the underside, and one with the Marines' Scorpion MBT slung under it.

A Marine Staff Sergeant barked instructions: 405th ODST, far left, Marine squads 1-4 in the next, 5-8 in the next." He conferred with a wounded Sangheili standing next to him "And Elites in the last transport." The last order was translated into gruff Sangheili by the wounded warrior.

She lead her men over to their ship, climbing into the crew bay around the M12G Gauss Warthog. They sat on the uncomfortable seats running along each side of the space, and the voice of the pilot came over the intercom.

"Dust off in 5, this will be a open view tour, so please keep your hands in the vehicle at all times."

A couple of chuckles came as a result of the pilot's jokes, and Sarah looked out the back of the dropship. Most of the view was obstructed by the front grill and chassis of the Hog, but she spotted four figures jogging across towards them.

The four Spartans entered the dropship quickly, seating themselves in the last available spaces. The tall one with the ODST shoulder pads sat directly next to her, face hidden behind the reflective visor. God they were tall. The noise of the engines rose in pitch and volume as the ship throttled up for lift-off, making the knee-high grasses flutter and ripple in the downdraught. She felt her stomach lurch as the almost overlaid Pelican heaved itself off of the deck, rising to about 50 metres and then turned northwards, accelerating quickly.

"Alright boys and girls, we're en route, ETA 10 minutes, get ready for a hard insertion." The pilot buzzed, and Sarah looked out of the partially obscured rear window. She saw the prow of another Pelican dropship fall in line behind them, the outline of its pilot visible past the early morning glare thrown off the windscreen.

"Hey Pilot, can we get some music in here? I like a little tune when I'm heading to almost certain death." Shouted Baker, her voice barely audible over the cacophony.

"How about something classic?" The Pilot's voice gave way to the familiar opening phrase of Wagner's Ride of the Valkyries. The music played not only inside the ship, but was also broadcast externally in a homage to 20th Century aerial warfare.

Sarah groaned, opening a private line to Ramirez. "Could we have gone for something a little less clich  ? Covvies are gonna hear this racket for miles."

He shrugged "Sometimes we need a little clich  , plus, I don't think stealth is on the menu any more."

The radio crackled, and she heard distorted voices come through. "This is Cowboy-2-1, we are entering combat zone, prepare to open fire with the thirties."

On her HUD, two massive radar contacts blinked into existence in front of them, both identified as AC-220 Vulture Gunships.

"Roger that Cowboy-2-1, this is callsign FOREMAN, you and Cowboy-2-2 are cleared to engage, happy hunting." Came a deeper voice over the comms.

"Copy FOREMAN, Cowboy-2-1 unleashing hell."

Their dropship banked to the left, and she realised that they had arrived at the covenant outpost. She caught glimpses of it from the back doorway which showed a low perimeter fence encircling a series of small buildings grouped together around a central spire. The whole operation was about 500 metres in diameter, and looked pitifully small compared to the main base.

The size difference wasn't improved upon by the addition of two gargantuan Vultures hovering over the structures, firing their massive twin 30mm canons into the streets. Blossoms of flame exploded into existence, and plumes of smoke listed lazily into the air, giving the impression of Hell on Earth- Well, Hell on Sigmus IV at any rate.

"Holy shit." Pierce whistled "There ain't gonna be any covenant left for us to kill."

"Just the way I like it." She muttered.

"Touchdown in 10!" Yelled the pilot as they swooped low over the fortification, banking sharply up to decelerate. There was a mechanical crunching noise and the M12G1 Gauss Warthog detached from the Pelican to fall a few feet and settle on the ground. The dropship scooted forwards a few more metres and then lowered itself low to the ground. Show time.

"Go go go!" The pilot ordered, and everyone in the bay stood up and ran out of the ship. The Spartans powered towards the base structures a hundred metres away, completely ignoring the 'Hog. She clambered into the driver's seat as the Pelican powered away, keying the ignition. She was rewarded by the throaty growl of the vehicle's engine.

The shadow of the moving gauss gun passed across her instruments, and she turned to see Ramirez on the turret, moving the gun around to face the base.

"Let's go LC!" He shouted, squeezing off a hypersonic slug. "I got some _cabezas de bisagra _to kill!"

Suddenly, the hairs on her neck stood on end and she tasted iron. Her ears began to ring, blood pumping through her head at a deafening volume.

"What the fu-" She moaned, and the sky exploded.

****Chief Petty Officer Jacob-209****

The lead Vulture didn't stand a chance. It had been a textbook use of the super-heavy units up until the Forerunner canon carved it clean in half. The bastards had camouflaged the weapon well, building their central spire around the long, thin rifle-like structure. When it fired, it shook off the curved purple metal and let forth a blinding orange beam of energy, which sliced through the hardened armour plating of the AC-220 like a hot knife through butter, bisecting the craft cleanly within seconds, rupturing the fuel tank and setting it ablaze. The two pilots in the cockpit ejected almost immediately as the gunship lost power and began to plummet to the ground. He saw two other parachutes blossom, but the remaining two crew members must not've been so lucky.

The blazing hulk of metal tumbled from the sky, landing squarely on a covenant supply depot and exploding, engulfing half the tiny covenant base in a fireball. In the distance, Jake could hear screams as the aliens perished in the inferno.

He tore his eyes away from the scene, looking at his Spartans: they were frozen to the spot, staring at the funeral pyre of one of the UNSCs most powerful air vehicle. He keyed the TEAMCOM.

"Move it, now. Get out of the open!"

No sooner had he spoken than the ground around them was peppered with plasma fire and energy rounds., throwing up tiny fragments of molten glass up at them, flaring their energy shields. The four Spartans pelted towards the perimeter wall, kicking up dust and drawing a barrage of fire. As they ducked behind the purple metal, he heard the second Vulture's pilot through the radio having only just come to grips with the destruction of the other.

"This is Cowboy 2-2 bugging out until that energy weapon can be taken offline, we're too slow moving, that thing'll cut right through us."

"Copy that Cowboy-2-2, ground forces will disable that gun, keep yourself low." Said the Marine company captain in response.

He knew that it would be too late. Even if the Vulture kept low behind the treeline, that forerunner gun would simply vaporise anything between them and blow the second craft away just like it had the first. The Marines would be too slow. It would be down to him and his Spartans to take the gun offline.

"Sabina, Rachel, prepare to move out, Josef, give us covering fire from here and then relocate into the treeline, you've got to take whatever Hinge-head's controlling that thing out." He snaked a fibre-optic camera over the wall, trying to get a good view of the forerunner weapon itself. He'd seen some similar schematics from humanity's interactions with Forerunner systems on the Ark,

Installation 00. The turret was usually automatic, but there was an access panel on a walkway halfway up the tall angular gun. He couldn't see it, but as the weapon swivelled around on an invisible axis, he knew eventually the operator would come into view. "As soon as you see the bastard controlling it, you take him out. Someone takes his place, you take him out as well. You keep on until they stop coming."

"Yes Boss, I've got the ammo for the job." He affirmed, sliding a magazine home.

"Keep that gun out of action until we can get to it." He turned to the others. "Suppressive fire as we go, regroup once we're in, proceed to the objective and take control. The Marines can do the killing while we do the actual work."

"We're on you Jay." Sabina said

"Right behind you, Boss." Rachel agreed, ducking reflexively as a couple of stray needles pinged over her head.

"Go!" He yelled, and the three runners vaulted over the low wall into a hail of needle fire. Shields flared and dirt flew. Josef set up his bipod on the wall and fired a rapid succession of shots with pinpoint accuracy, slowing the hail of fire to a drizzle and probably saving their lives. Jake and the others powered through the enemy fire and slammed up against the nearest building.

He breathed heavily, shouldering his battered MA5D and swung around the corner, quickly taking down two cowering Unngoy with three-round bursts. He signalled for the other to follow him, and they fell in line behind him as if they had been a tightly knit team all their lives instead of the two short weeks they had actually been working together.

"Boss-man. I'm getting fire here, are you in a position to assist?" Josef's voice came over the radio, ice-cool despite the circumstances.

"Negative, we've got no line of sight." He stated, searching for the sources of the gunfire.

"Perhaps we can be of assistance Spartans?" Came a cocky voice over the comms, and a full flight of 7 Hornet VTOL Attack Aircraft screamed overhead, a cacophony of 30mm cannon fire accompanying them as they reduced the half a dozen Jackal sharpshooters taking refuge on a nearby roof to mincemeat.

Josef keyed the 'All clear' signal on TEAMCOM, suddenly silent. Jacob shook his head at the Hornets' intervention. "Nice of you to drop by fly-boys, but hang back until the gun is offline."

"Roger that."

He changed the encryption for the Spartans' TEAMCOM, and then led Rachel and Sabina towards the dominating Forerunner cannon. On their way, they passed the burning wreckage of the Vulture. The warped metal creaked and groaned with heat stress as the shell burned, throwing off caustic smoke into the air.

"Poor bastards" Whispered Rachel. He turned to look at what she was, and saw the burning corpse of one of the airman who'd been trapped inside when the craft got hit. Part of Jake wished that the airman had been killed by the first hit.

"Stay focussed, we've still got a job to do." He growled, anger rising inside him.

They paced another 50 metres towards the massive gun, which was swivelling quickly around, trying to target the flight of Hornets buzzing around the perimeter, but the nimble VTOLs always ducked behind a ridge to lose the lock on. They came to a crossroads, and he held up his fist to signal that they halt, which they did so.

"What's the hold up?" Sabina whispered, swinging her SAW around, searching for targets. He had thought he'd seen something on his motion detector-

Too late. The air around them shimmered and three cloaked Sangheili appeared from nowhere and tackled the Spartans, wrenching their weapons away from them. Jake fell to the ground as the full weight of his adversary landed on him. The Elite bore no weapon other than his energy sword, which glowed white hot in the gap between them, causing both their energy shields to spark and shimmer. He wrestled for control of the blade, but the elite had his whole body weight behind the arm, and the sword slowly drew closer to his chest, tortuously slowly. His diminished energy shield gave up the ghost and failed.

The Elite howled loudly in his face, split jaw opened wide in a grimace, spittle caking his visor. He tried to jerk his knee upwards to try and dislodge the alien, but the suit wouldn't respond. A large flashing icon appeared on his HUD and told him what he already knew: his servo had failed, and even his augmented muscles couldn't provide the force necessary for the manoeuvre.

"Your destruction is the will of the gods, and I am their instrument" Growled the Elite as the energy sword made contact with his chest-plate, searing through layers of composite armour and gel layers in seconds. Red hot pain sprung up across his chest as the blade carved into his skin. His vision grew darker, but he saw through the haze of pain that a friendly blip on his motion sensor was approaching rapidly from the north.

He struggled to turn his neck sideways for the briefest second and saw a black armoured ODST sprinting towards them, their hand grasping the hilt of the combat blade strapped to the chest plate. With his last ounce of strength he jammed his elbows into the dirt and pushed off, butting the alien with his helmet simultaneously. The move caused him searing pain as the energy sword cut more into his chest, but the force was enough to both exasperate the alien shields, which failed with a yellow flare, and lift the Elite slightly, into the deadly embrace of the ODST, whose combat blade was drawn expertly across the unguarded neck, causing purple blood to spill onto his helmet.

The Elite gurgled his own blood, his strength fading as Jake wrestled the energy sword from his dying grasp, rolling over so that the Spartan crouched on top of the dying warrior. He drew his sidearm, a

modified M6G Magnum, and pressed the barrel between the creature's jaws. It looked up at him, dying eyes still full of malice and hatred, and he pulled the trigger.

The ODST approached him, cleaning off the combat blade that had moments ago saved his life, and stood before him, depolarising her visor to reveal a smug grin across her beautiful features.

"So, that's one drop pod and your life you owe me now."

He struggled to stand, the servos in his knee resisting loudly. As he became upright, the warning message in his HUD blinked off and his motion became free again. He deduced that the servo was damaged in a way that made it malfunction when horizontal. So as long as no more Elites tackled him, he should be fine.

He looked the Helljumper up and down, not saying a word. Her grin shrank in size a little, but he was smiling slightly behind his. Rachel and Sabina sidled up to him, covered in Sangheili blood from their own adversaries, making the meeting feel rather like they were ganging up on the lone ODST.

"Where's your squad?" He asked her, leaning down to grab the now deactivated Energy Sword.

"Closing in on the last file of Hinge-Heads. Our Hog took a plasma grenade, otherwise I'd have gotten here sooner." She replied, reloading her Assault Rifle.

"You have my thanks Corporal." Jake said, offering her the hilt of the Energy Sword. "You've earned that."

She took it, smiling broadly. "I'll head back to my squad, we're pushing in on the bastards now, won't be long." With that, she took off down the road back towards the loudening sounds of gunfire.

"I'll never pretend to understand ODSTs." Sabina muttered

He didn't respond, just shrugged and started off towards the gun. As they approached, a loud crack rang out and a tracer round flew directly over their heads, expertly burying itself in the neck of the Elite who was perched in the control seat of the shining, angular tower. Josef was on the hunt.

They dashed into the central courtyard, tossing a few grenades into the vague crowd of enemies on their left, who were evidently focussed more on the force of ODSTs and Marines than them. They darted inside the tower, but it was obvious that even if they got up to the top, the amount of enemies behind them would swarm them.

"Rachel, Sabina, hold this position, take them out while they're in the open. Fall back if necessary, but try to keep them off, I'm going up." He ordered, running towards the platform lift at the end of the short hallway. Like all Forerunner structures, the walls themselves seemed to exude light. Behind him, the incredible fire rate of the SAW was creating an almost continuous noise, and the sounds of distant gunfire were getting closer: the net was closing, and soon they would win.

"FOREMAN to Spartan-209." Came a quiet voice in his ear. The very air around him seemed to chill at the sound.

"Copy." He gasped, suddenly aware of a lance of pain from his deep chest wound. Every bone and muscle ached, and he suddenly found himself struggling to walk, the dodgy actuator in his knee not helping matters. His shields were dead.

"The rest of the Battlegroup's scheduled to arrive directly over your current position in less than a minute, and that gun is pointing right at them. We need that gun offline ASAP. Thermals indicate one Elite still in the tower with you."

He stumbled onto the platform lift, feeling the slight tug as he was transported upwards. "Copy that FOREMAN, this gun is as good as gone. Over and out."

He touched his glove to his chest and pulled it away, deep red blood came with it, and from the feeling of it at least part of his sternum was also charred to a crisp. His hastily treated injuries were also giving him much cause for complaint. All in all. He knew that he was on his last legs.

"Boss, I can't get a clear shot on our gunner." Josef said to him over comms. "Plus he's pointing the thing straight up now."

He could feel it, the subtle vibrations of the building were increasing in frequency, which could only mean that the gun was getting ready to fire again. It would strike the battle-group just as it emerged from slip-space. They wouldn't even have a chance to evade.

He would have to stop it.

"I'll drag him out of hiding, you get ready to take the shot." He wheezed. Shit. His lung must be in the process of collapsing.

"Affirmative. Just hold him out from behind the console and I should be able to get him at this distance." He said coolly, and Jake recognised the tone of his voice as that when a sniper goes into a zen-state of mind.

He arrived at the top, the mid-morning sun temporarily blinding him as he emerged into the open air. Far below him, the last scrap of Loyalist resistance was being slowly crushed, and about 10 feet away from him, the enemy that would make or break him stood behind a tall console covered in holographic symbols.

He limped over, half dragging his malfunctioning leg, and pressed the muzzle of his rifle into the back of the Elite. He pulled the trigger, only to hear a dull clicking noise. The gun had either jammed, or run out of ammo. It didn't really matter the why or the how. Just the what. He tossed his rifle aside, sending it clattering downwards onto the roof of a building, and tackled the Elite as it turned to face him.

What he didn't see was the hilt of the energy sword in the elite's hand beneath him. When it activated, pressed up against his stomach, it produced twin blades of white hot plasma which ripped through his

armour and flesh, the two searing blades protruding from his back just below his kidneys. He gasped in agony as he thrust his combat knife into the Elite's shoulder.

He got to his feet shakily and staggered backwards, his hands up but not quite touching the hilt as it stuck out from his stomach.

"Boss!" Josef screamed down TEAMCOM.

"Focus on the target" He grunted through gritted teeth. "Don't worry about me."

"I'm going to kill that mother-" The young Spartan started, but he cut him off.

"No. Don't let that anger take hold of you. Focus on the target. Calm yourself." He wheezed, leaning backwards on the low railing on the gun platform, his vision tunnelling.

The Elite grunted and pulled the combat knife out of his shoulder, advancing menacingly towards him, away from the safety of the console. He tried to stand up and fight, but all strength had left him. The towering alien loomed over him, drawing his plasma pistol.

"The gods will reward me favourably for this." The Sangheili growled in perfect English. "We are all given a sacred task to purge the path from filth!"

"Oh yeah?" He gasped, standing a little straighter. "When you see your gods. Tell them you failed."

The warrior barely had time to look angrier than he already was before the 14.5 x 114mm AP sniper round tore the creature's head apart. It didn't so much explode as vaporise, leaving the body to fall twitching to the floor and slip through the railing, tumbling to the floor below.

Jacob-209 staggered forwards, dimly aware of his surroundings. Nothing else mattered. He had to stop the gun. He gasped in pain and leant on the console as he pressed the big red holographic button. If human and forerunner language had any similarities, that would cancel the launch.

"Jay!"

He was vaguely aware of familiar hands on his shoulders gently supporting him as he collapsed backwards. Sabina's helmet swam into his vision, and he heard her over the communications as if from down a well.

"This is Spartan-211 requesting immediate MEDEVAC from my location, Spartan down, repeat, Spartan down."

"Copy that Spartan-211, this is UNSC _Nightingale_ dispatching priority medevac Pelican co-ordinates, ETA€|." The words seemed to meld into one long syllable.

"Sab." He managed to choke, his vision entirely dark now. "I-"

The world blackened as he slipped into the murky depths of unconsciousness.

****Corporal Sarah "Hawk" Hawkins, Aboard UNSC Hospital ship
Nightingale**** in orbit around Sigmus IV****

"Well Corporal, looks like you're good to go, just lay off that leg for a while and you'll be combat ready in no time." Said the Corpsman as he looked over her x-ray and CT scan images. "You can return to your position aboard the Hydra as soon as possible, but no combat training for three weeks, understood?"

She nodded, uncomfortable to be in nothing but a hospital gown "Thanks Doc, I'll be outta your hair soon."

As the medical officer turned to leave, she cleared her throat quietly.

"Um, any word on how the Spartan is doing?" she asked. Everyone on the ship was talking about it, and everyone who was there on the ground was grilled about it extensively. It had been a pretty dramatic sight, the hulking god-like Spartan stumbling backwards with a full Energy Sword sticking out of his stomach. It had happened just as the last of the Loyalist forces had surrendered. All in all, the last push had cost the UNSC 5 ODSs, a dozen Marines, and potentially one Spartan. But Spartans never die. They're just MIA.

The Corpsman pursed his lips "You're well aware that I can't speak about that Corporal. ONI rules". His eyes looked sympathetic as he left the medical examination suite. She quickly got dressed into black dress uniform and left the deck, travelling down to the shuttle bay level.

Her ride was waiting: a medevac Pelican had its engines powered up in bay 7. She jogged over to it and sucked inside, joining the other crew members of the Hydra. Ramirez grinned when he saw her, and she gave a thumbs up and slapped on the divider wall between crew bay and cockpit.

"Come on Pilot, we're good to go." She called.

There was no response, but the rear door closed smoothly and the engines reach take off pitch. She looked around the darkly lit cabin, at the dozen ODSs who were all, apart from Ramirez and herself, passed out asleep in their seats.

"Corporal, I heard a rumour from the Nightingale's nav AI while we were waiting, that the Elites are going to glass the whole planet anyway, after all we went through to take the damn place." Ramirez muttered, rubbing his brand new bright pink scar across his neck.

She shrugged "I heard the same from some orderly on med deck. It seems a waste, granted, but you gotta look at the big picture. If either of us gets the planet, then it's gonna cause tension and/or war. Now, I ask you, is this planet really worth going to war with the Covenant again?" She leaned forward

He thought about it, then shook his head slowly "After nearly thirty

years, I think we could afford to let this one slide."

She nodded "Exactly. Besides, the people we've lost thereâ€¦" She stared out of the port side window "Burn the place. Burn it to the ground."

****Captain Rich Hall, Control Room of Sigmus IV****

"What do you mean you want to glass the place?" Vice Admiral Yao spat furiously at Cro 'Cylen.

The Shipmaster looked rather amusedly down at the petite Asian woman, evidently not considering her a threat to his decision. "Yes. It would seem that the prize within this world would upset the very delicate balance of power between the Swords of Sanghelios and the Humans. I would propose that neither of us have it. That we part ways from this world as equal-footed allies, rather than uneven enemies. I do not have a hunger for more war."

"I believe I may have a solution to your dilemma" piped up the Monitor of the planet. The yellow-lit orb had made itself known as soon as the diplomatic shuttle had landed on the surface, rejoicing that reclaimers had come to activate the installation. When it had become clear that this course of action was not being planned for, the device had gone into a sort of sulk, before becoming unbearable chirpy again.

"What is it, Oracle?" resonated the Shipmaster's voice, echoing in the vast cavern.

"Yes, Abhorrent Revelation, what do you propose?" Hall said, trying to soothe the irate Vice Admiral.

"My makers wisely installed a failsafe mechanism into this planet's architecture, should the installation need to evade the Flood." The Monitor chimed, dancing in the air happily. "I can initiate a relocational Slip-Space jump to galactic co-ordinates known only by me. This way neither party is unfairly treated, and I get to keep my installation."

"That sounds most agreeable" Hall affirmed, glancing at the Admiral. The Elites didn't know it, but even without the actual planet, there was still a wealth of information to be obtained from the recordings that the Spartans had made while down in the depths of the Forerunner machinery of the planet.

"I believe that could work." Agreed the Shipmaster, nodding his head slowly. "If we are in agreement, we shall leave this planet for time to have. Maybe in the future, when tensions are not so high, one of us might rediscover this place, and then maybe it shall not be so coveted." He gestured towards the Monitor "Besides, I am sure that it will be well-maintained by the Oracle."

"Indubitably" The Monitor spoke.

Hall nodded "It seems we have an accord." He saluted along with the Admiral, and Cro offered a massive three-fingered hand for shaking, a rare offer from an Elite, which both UNSC officers accepted.

"So that's what real diplomacy looks like." Chimed Athena from Hall's

Neural Implant. She wasn't technically in his head, but in the datapad in his pocket but her voice still rang from the back of his head, heard only by him. "No grand speeches, no signed bit of paper, no parade or medals. Just two wise old warriors agreeing not to fight for the time being."

"I'm barely 50" Hall muttered

"What was that Captain?" Yao asked as they walked out of the control room towards the snowy valley.

Hall suppressed a smile "Nothing Admiral, just talking to the devil on my shoulder."

****Petty Officer 1****st**** Class Sabina-211, UNSC
Nightingale****

"You complete _Sraka_!" She shouted, slipping into her native Ukranian in her anger.

"Jesus Sab, calm down, I've got enough of a bloody headache without you adding to it. Although I will say the morphine is doing a wonderful job suppressing it." Jacob grinned from his hospital bed.

He had been through a total of 25 hours of surgery in the last 48, having new kidneys, spleen, large intestine and liver transplanted in from flash-cloning vats. The carbonised bone in his chest was now being healed by stem cell therapy, and there was a new scar right the way across his chest.

She span on the spot, unsure what to do with her hands, but 100% sure she wanted to break something with them. "'Sab.. I-'? Do you know how much those words have haunted me in the last two days? What if they were the last things you'd ever say?"

"Nice to know you care Sab." He said, beckoning her over "Come on, I'm in a drug-induced bliss, now's the perfect time for a forgiveness hug."

She laughed in spite of herself. "You are stoned."

He shrugged "Maybe."

She punched his arm "I'm glad you're not dead"

He winced, raising one eyebrow "Well you have a funny way of showing it. Where are the others?"

"Providing escort security for Captain Hall and Admiral Lin Yao. Always moving forward. You know you really scared Josef back there. He was literally looking at it all happen in 40x magnification."

He shrugged again "But he took the shot. Saved my life. He managed to control the anger that his messed up frontal lobe provided. He beat his own brain chemistry."

She nodded slowly "I suppose so. Vice Admiral Yao is giving us her personal backing to form a unit. I guess they passed her test."

He smiled softly "I guess so. The doctors will probably want to be back to probe me in a little while, so you'd best get back to Dr Halsey. Try and satiate her lust for forerunner knowledge."

She nodded and turned towards the door. "Yes Boss. Always moving forward."

"Always. Oh, and please can you do me a favour?"

She turned and sighed "Of course, what's up?"

"Can you please get them to stop playing the same three songs over the hospital PA system?" He moaned "Seriously, if I have to listen to these god-awful renditions of Mozart again, I'm at a slight liberty to pulling all these tubes out to end it all."

She laughed. Pure, honest laughter. It was the best thing she'd heard in a good long while "Good night Jay."

****Chief Petty Officer Jacob-209, UNSC **_**Nightingale**_**

Long after Sabina had left, and after the Corpsmen and doctors had satisfied their need to cause him as much discomfort as possible, he lay there, thinking of what new alliances and partnerships had been forged down there on that impossible planet. What had been found, and lost.

"Always moving forward."

End
file.